

Thronebound
The Last King 3
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1 - A Crown of Burning Venom *Gemmazione, Regola Dei Volpe 1*

On the day that they crowned Artemio Volpe, there were omens aplenty.

The heat was unseasonably high for so early in the year. Some said it was the factory forges of Agrant, burning night and day to arm their forces for the war to come. Others said it was the lingering effect of dragons having roamed the lands, the fire of their breath still lingering in the air. When the ladies of court preened and teased their hair, it wilted under the heat. Pressed suits drooped. The farmers crops broke from seed almost as soon as they could replant their fields after last season's chaos.

A storm brewed upon the horizon. The city of Covotana seemed to be under the eye of some vast storm. The sky directly above it and the surrounding lands was open and blue, but dark clouds could be seen from the top of the palace no matter which way one turned. As far as omens went, it was far from subtle. Of course, anyone with the slightest bit of sense would have realised that the unnatural weather was due to the intervention of some Shadebound assigned to keep the sky clear during the new King's procession through the city, but for the superstitious, it was just another sign that something supernatural was afoot.

It probably was not a good omen that the very throne on which the king was to sit had been sundered in half during the battle with Agrant for ownership of the city, nor that the one who had sundered it and nearly brought the whole palace tumbling down was now to be king.

A more insidious omen being discussed by the common folk rather than nobility, who believed themselves above such pettiness despite all evidence to the contrary, was the matter of the king's arm. It had long been believed that under a healthy king, Espher prospered, and under a sickly one it waned. Some part of this was based in truth of course, when a ruler was elderly or infirm, it left the upper echelons of society without someone to watch over them and ensure that their behavior remained honorable. Some of the worst disasters in Espher's history had been during such periods.

To have a king ascending to the throne while bearing so obvious a wound was unprecedented. If the land reflected the ruler, would this mean that Espher too would be crippled? That it would lose some portion of its territory?

Overshadowing all these lesser superstitions and concerns was the worst of the omens, the persistent rumour that the old king had died under Artemio's hand, and that they were placing the reins of Espher into the hands of a usurper.

Some argued that the Cerva had been the usurpers and this was a return of the true king's line, some argued that Volpe's ascent was based upon the will of the court and the high opinion of the Cerva before they passed, others still made sly comments about his position being a temporary one until the current crises had passed Espher by, and a less strategically competent but more pliable noble in good standing might be convinced to take the throne. It was said that the old queen had been his lover, and that was why he had her killed. It was said that he'd murdered his own father when it suit his purposes. So many things were said, but nothing was known.

The court gossips were delighted.

Yet despite all of these ill omens, the procession began mid-morning, with the king draped in all the finery and jewels that had not been destroyed in the destruction wrought upon the keep being rolled through the town in an open topped carriage so that all of the common people who would likely never cross paths with anyone so elevated again in their lives might lay eyes upon him and judge his worth. Most often this was a time of great jubilation and cheering to accompany the marching band that followed in formation after the king's carriage and the riders of the highest noble houses, but even the good-mannered jeering that had been reserved for particularly unpopular new royalty was absent as Artemio was taken through the streets alone.

Tradition would have had his parents with him, his bride to be by his side, all of his house assembled about him in that same carriage, the highest moment of all their high living, to see one of their own made the master of all that they surveyed. Artemio had no-one. The rumor mill had little to say about that. His sister, he had sent off on some mission to barbaric lands and was not expected to return. The shadebound girl that there had been hopes he'd wed to foster powerful heirs was absent too, though only those who had fought the Arazi knew whence she had departed, and they were tight lipped about her.

When the people on the street looked up at him, there was fear in their eyes, but also awe. The streets of Covotana were cracked, and it was by their new king's might. The enemy who had seized the city were routed, and it was by their new king's wit. He had given his own flesh so that Espher could be free. Few sights could have been more worthy of awe.

For his part, Artemio could not have asked for a better response. There were always conspirators in the wings, just waiting for a sign of weakness so that any king could be brought low and replaced, the disdain of the common man the foremost sign among them. He had something better than the love of the people. He had their worship. What some duke had done on a distant battlefield meant little to a butcher or baker, but this mythic figure shining in gold and glory on the same streets that they walked every day had worked his miracles here, in plain sight of them.

The clothes were stifling in the awful heat, layer upon layer of finery that had been hastily hauled together from various wardrobes after he'd utterly ruined the official robes of coronation that had been made for him. For those who read into clothing, he was presenting a kaleidoscopic clash of influences. Cloak clasps from a period when his own ancestors had a tenuous grasp on the throne, boots from a brief failed dalliance with a Teatro of the commons, an ermine cape lifted directly from the Cerva's garderobe. The twin kings had doubles of everything, which made life

somewhat easier, even if the difference in build between them and Art was like that between a willow and an oak.

Yet within the mixed messages of his garb, there were some constants. Everywhere that they could be secreted, there were pouches of medicinal herbs, surrounding him in a swampy miasma, hiding the aroma of decay that clung to him. A wound hastily closed by fire on the battlefield was not a clean suture. It leaked. It ached. Some days it felt as though it were burning all over again, though he felt certain that he'd seared away all the nerves in his panic. The only advantage he could see in his ridiculous costume was that it concealed his arms from sight, and he did not have to worry about anyone gawking at their mutilated king.

There had been discussion among the courtiers about a false limb, something gaudy and golden, or porcelain cast, to set the minds of those meeting him at ease. He had declined. Let them be uncomfortable. He'd given his hand for them, the least they could do was look at it and remember the debt he was owed. It was much like the repairs on the palace. The cracks that had been set in the stone had to be filled, and masons had come out with all manner of clever ways to mask the damage, and make it appear that the place had never been through so much as a knock. Artemio had declined. People needed to remember that the heart of the kingdom had been struck at, that they could not rest on their laurels and trust to fate that all would be well. And they needed to remember what he could do when he was pushed.

It felt like the procession took hours, and with the sun beating down on him from on high, it was all that Artemio could do to remain upright and stern. He did not care that all eyes were on him, life as a pariah had ensured that they always were, but he would not show human weakness. Not today of all days.

In all the years that he had been shadebound, there were few times that he had spent his life frivolously. A second here or there to make life easier perhaps, but never the way that he was doing now. Pulling the shade of his dead grandfather, Bisnonno Fiore, into his body so that he could bask in the chill of the grave that the dead man brought with him.

"This is how it should always have been. You were always destined to rule. Kingship is in your blood."

The only downside of the old king's presence was the constant litany of praise that he was raining down on Artemio. From the moment that they were bonded, the old man had been trying to protect Artemio, his sister, his family. He had exerted all the power available to a shade to keep them alive, and it had all been for this purpose; to see the Volpe line returned to the throne of Espher.

"You will be a great king, a just king, one that will not waver at the words of self-serving advisors, or the frivolity of morality in the face of truth, one always aware of the dangers of being ruled by another."

It was a distraction that he truly did not need, because every once in a while he would cast his glance out into the crowd and there would be eyes meeting his. A familiar face among the strangers. They did not look at him with awe. They did not stare at him as though he was their

savior. They did not adore him. They observed with hardened, closed off expressions. As though he was betraying their cause.

He did not know at which point the Cult of the Last King had come to know his identity. Some of them always had, as it was necessary to inveigle himself into their good graces. Others had probably learned of it from them, or when he had been too casual in their company. Not to mention however many the deceased queen Cadence had informed in her attempts to play all sides. Every one of those peasant rebels held blackmail material against him now. His involvement with them would not be believed, of course and only the Cerva kings had known of his father's involvement with the rebels, after the fact. Yet it meant that he could not do the obvious thing to a king who was attempting to consolidate his power and have them all rounded up. An individual speaking his name to inquisitors could be discounted, but with the weight of numbers, and the application of pressure on those held captive, a firmer picture of his involvement, and use of the cult for his own purposes might very well come to light.

"A new Volpe dynasty, stretching on through eternity. Guardians of Espher's sovereignty against any who would seek to harm her."

In a few years, when the wars were won and his position secured, it would not matter that the story came out. He would be able to spin it into his own legend without overmuch effort, but right now, things were tenuous. Those noble houses that had been in receipt of generous stipends from the Agrantine empire had now found the golden teat had run dry despite all their decades of loyal service to a foreign power, and without Cadence to serve as a voice of reason to them, there were already erupting rumors reaching his ears about some great houses of Espher that would not bend their knee to him. The time for such things had not yet come, he was not even crowned yet, but even a suggestion that his ascent was not by the will of the Cerva but through some treachery of his own would add fuel to such fires of insurrection.

If Cadence had lived, everything would have been different, that faction would have been placated. If the Agrantine ambassador had lived, she might have told the story to all and sundry about her desires for Artemio to be king, poisoning those who hated Agrant against him, while also placating the faction that currently looked to be a problem. Both women were dead, and the promised peace either one could have offered died with them.

"You do not need support from lesser men, or the soft words of women. You do not need the approval of foreign kings to rule. You will make Espher a force to be reckoned with again. A power that Empires dare not cross. I know that you will."

If it had been any other shade, then Artemio would have forced it away from him long before now. To hear one talking freely without the information being demanded of them was a clear sign of loose control and a poor contract. Speech with a shade meant that they were touching upon your mind. Avoiding the influence of shades upon your patterns of thought was the first lesson of the House of Seven Shadows. Or near enough to the first that it made little difference. Furthermore, it was a poor idea to keep a shade around when it could feed not on the energy it was being deliberately given, but on abstracts.

“Beneath you lies a mountain of flame. But we silenced it. We made it serve us. We set the first stone upon its crown and built from nothing the greatest city in the world. Look upon that city, built by your ancestors, a gift from the past to you. Generation after generation, building atop the work of the last. It will be yours; it will be your children’s; it will be your children’s children’s.”

It had been a subject long debated how some shades persisted even without feeding, how their form was changed as memory of them changed, and the belief of others transformed the freshly dead into creatures of legend. Initially it was assumed to be a direct result of their absorbing other lesser shades, yet there were shades that cohabited rather than feasting upon one another. Shades that were distinct enough in their nature, that it seemed they could not consume one another. Their nature could be defined by abstract ideas attached to them, and some theorized that the more belief that there was in those abstracts, the more strength the shades could gather. Instead of tapping the life from the living directly, they could filter feed on the ambient life of the world, when it was close enough in nature to the shade.

“To be king is to be the envy of all men and the enemy of all men. All will seek you, demand of you, prey upon you, but it is you that has the power. You who’s will is writ as law. To be king is to be alone. To be king is to be beset at all times. Not a moment of your life shall you be unattended, and not a moment of your life shall you be able to trust those who would attend you.”

In life, Bisnonno Fiore had been a great many things, but the thing for which he was best remembered was being King. Having him here, when all minds were turned to kingship, when a new king was being crowned, he was gorging. If not for the fact that Fiore had always maintained himself barely upon the edge of starvation due to his refusal to accept fair payment from Artemio for his services, then it was likely he could have gained such power from a gorging like this that it might have put Artemio’s control over him at risk. Given how tenuous that control had proven to be, it was a legitimate concern.

With that in mind, he forced the shade from his body and mind with a grunt of effort and rose to his feet as they reached the bridge to the palace. It had survived the chaos with minimal damage, and so too had the pools and fountains beneath it. What the castellan jokingly called a moat. This would be the last opportunity for most of the people of Covotana to see him, possibly in their lives, so he made certain to wave graciously at them all as he descended to the cobbles. Hundreds of faces stared back at him. Some mustered cheers, others waved little flags, but most were still and silent. Robbing the day of any hope of joy. Artemio cared nothing for frivolity. He did not need their love. Just their obedience.

Yet it was that awkward silence that made the screams cut through all the more clearly. Starting from the walls to the north of the city where laborers had not even been spared this single day from their repairs for the coronation and carrying closer and closer as the shadow filled up the sky.

The beating of wings echoed down onto Covotana. A dragon in flight. Burning death from the skies.

There were watchtowers being raised all across the north. Patrols scouting out the ashen ruins of the farms and forests that the Arazi had destroyed on their march. If the enemy had returned, then there would have been an alarm raised. This made no sense. They would not send a single dragon to die, not with the way that they worshiped and adored them. They would not waste the life of one against Covotana's Shadebound defenders, not again.

Yet there was no denying that there was a dragon in their sky, dropping from the blind spot of the sun directly into the heart of the city. Artemio cast off the ermine cape and was wrestling to loose his hand from the tangle of other silks, but before he could even prepare himself, he found himself surrounded. Of all the nobles who had been in the train behind him, no small portion were the shadebound who had fought alongside him in the north. Men and women who's trust he was not being granted by virtue of his new station, but that he had earned with his prowess. They too were dressed in finery, but they were there to make a shield of their flesh to defend him, without a second thought.

For all that he doubted the nobility of Espher, it seemed that far more than he could have realised were still valorous. Or at least wanted to make a show of their valor before their new king and sundry. Shades were called and bolts of ice and lightning leapt up into the sky. For all the fire of their breath and the power of their body, a dragon had no defense against the powers of the dead.

The valorous defense of the king was wiped away, as though some great invisible hand has smeared it aside. The power of it set every hair on Artemio's body prickling.

There was no foreign magic at work here, his spiritual senses did not sing for the power of another land. A shadebound had cast their might aside, a shadebound of such power that a half dozen of Covotana's finest could not best her.

"Stand down!" He bellowed to be heard over the sudden chaos. "If it were an enemy, we would already be ash. Stand down, I said!"

There was no reluctance from his honor guard. They had felt the same power as him when their attacks were dissolved.

The dragon descended with slow steady beats of its wing blowing everyone back. His fine ermine cloak tumbled across the bridge as though the rodents it had been had returned to life and now fled from this apex predator. The crowd that had fled at the first sight of it now came creeping back.

As its claws touched down, he was at last at an angle to see who rode atop it, and he could not stop the childish grin that touched his face before he could master himself. "Dear sister, so kind of you to join us."

She was dressed in the garb of some northern savage, bones and feathers dangling from her, but beneath the dust of the road, or sky as the case may have been, there could be no mistaking the shining red of her hair as she slipped down from the dragon's back and ran over to embrace him.

She stopped short, just staring at him. Eyes raking him up and down. Taking in all that had changed in their brief parting. When her voice came, it was surprisingly soft. “Oh Art, your hand.”

Once more a smile came unbidden. She had always been there to look out for him, and the moment that they parted, he lost a limb. It was hard not to draw some connection. “A small price to pay, all things considered.”

Her brows drew down. “Who did this to you, I’ll...”

Before she could work herself into a rage on his behalf, he cut her off. “Already attended to, dear sister.”

The crowd had pressed back in around them, as close as they dared to get to the dragon. One brave or profoundly stupid small child had escaped his mother’s hold and darted across to pet the thing as though it were a horse. The dragon didn’t seem to mind, but the crowd was pinned in place with tension.

Some courtiers, mindful of the time and deciding that little details like returning sisters and the arrival of dragons in the city mattered less than maintaining the careful schedule of the day had begun inching forwards towards Artemio, as if they might be able to hustle him along to the next stage of the process of coronation through willfully ignoring what was going on. There was the nobility of Espher that he had come to know and loathe.

Harmony let one of her dirty hands trail down the silk robes draped over him. The embroidery of the Volpe colors matched with the flag of Espher. She would not need genius to parse what was going on but she had not been witness to the intermediate steps, so he could understand her confusion. She spoke barely above a whisper, as though worried the attendants would suddenly notice the trick Artemio was trying to pull. “What have I missed?”

Awareness of the ears all around them had not escaped Artemio’s notice either, the difference was that he would not blunder on into dangerous territory when there was a simple solution. “This evening we can trade tales. I imagine there is quite a story as to how you came to be riding a dragon too.”

“Oh, my manners.” Artemio’s heart swelled as she said that, every bit the child she’d always been, even now, dressed in the bones of her enemies. “Sorry. Yelena, this is my brother Artemio. Artemio, this is Yelena.”

He stared up into the face of the dragon, and he did not flinch. He could not afford to with all eyes upon him. It was as fearsome a beast as any that they’d faced in the war. Quite a bit bigger than the majority of those ones too. He gave a stiff bow, and to his amazement, instead of lunging forward and biting him in half, the dragon’s head dipped in answer.

He did his best to address the creature as though it were a person, as Harmony was giving him the sideways look that had always meant ‘be polite and play nice.’ It was an all too familiar expression. “I’m afraid that my lessons in etiquette did not extend to the correct way to greet a dragon.”

“Just say hello,” Harmony whispered, “She’ll answer through Kagan, if she’s got something that needs saying.”

“Greetings, Yelena.” The dragon went on giving him its implacable stare, and he began to become increasingly aware of how flammable he was. Registering Harmony’s other words, he let his eyes drift to the other dismounting riders with no small amount of gratitude. “Welcome back to you also, Master Kagan, and to you Orsina. I am beyond delighted to see that you are well.”

Whatever had occurred in the Arazi lands seemed to have changed the girl. Gone was the wilting wallflower playing at being a noblewoman. The imperious tone in her voice was icy cold. “Better than ever.”

He tried to meet her gaze, to read her expression, to understand whether her ire was reserved for him, or if she was simply overwhelmed by the presence of so many people, all peering at her, but for all that he was the man who would be king, it seemed he was of less interest to her than smoke rising from the city’s chimneys.

He cleared his throat and drew their attention back to the situation at hand. “I’m afraid that you’ve caught me at a rather awkward moment, I’m just about to be crowned king of Espher, would you care to attend?”

Harmony reached out and took his hand, but Kagan’s rumbling voice ruined the moment. “Yelena doesn’t think that she’ll fit.”

“You’re quite right, it may be something of a tight squeeze.” Artemio hoped that his forced smile did not look too manic. “Perhaps I could make her acquaintance more thoroughly when the coronation is through?”

The dragon let out a rumble. Not a growl, certainly not a word, but a sound that Artemio felt in his chest. He carefully wet his lips then asked, “Was that a yes?”

Kagan seemed like he was trying to contain a smile. “She said... bring meat.”

To think he’d been barely less rude the first time that he was in the company of royalty. “I’m sure that the kitchen staff will have something to her tastes. We’ll get her anything that she desires. Any friend of my sister is a friend of mine.”

“Going to regret saying that,” Kagan chuckled. “She hasn’t had a decent meal in a few centuries.”

“Then the Castellan will be delighted to hear that all the money he spent on the feast will not be going to waste.”

A million questions burned in Artemio’s mind and he dare not seek a single answer. He had to remind himself each time that he opened and shut his mouth that there was no hurry. There was no ticking clock between them and oblivion, there was no panicked rush to gather every answer before the executioner’s blade fell on them, but after the past year, he was so conditioned to crisis that it was impossible to convince himself that they had the time now.

The dragon Yelena launched herself into the air, knocking the children gathered around her from their feet and setting their parents wailing. It was only the steady rumble of Kagan's laughter that stilled the panic and stopped the guards darting in to be inevitably slaughtered by the monster.

Turning on his heel, Artemio headed for the palace, his sole living family member trailing along behind him reeking of smoke and death, some peasant girl and foreigner toddling along after that. It was hardly a suitable honor guard for a king, but as Art had to keep reminding himself, he was hardly a king. He was being thrust into power because there were no viable alternatives, because war was coming for Espher and without competent leadership they all faced extinction. He did not make the mistake of considering for even a moment that anyone wanted him to rule, that anyone wanted his children to sit the throne after him and inherit Espher as their birth-right. He was not a fool. The only one who seemed fool enough to believe any of that was the old dead king still lurking in his shadow.

If it were any other coronation, Artemio Volpe would have been fascinated from start to finish. Observing every intricacy of procedure and ceremony, digesting the speeches and their implications. Eyeballing the new king, for any sign of emotion or favoritism. But today he was not atop a distant hill watching a storm unfold, he was at the eye of the tempest, and it was all that he could do to let it wash over him without knocking him from his feet.

Tradition would have had his oldest living relative place the actual crown upon his head. He had tapped Duchess Granchio to fulfil the role in the absence of any family, but now that Harmony had returned, the stout country lady who'd served so well during the siege of Covotana had very deliberately taken a step back.

Forced into the limelight despite the grime clinging to her, Harmony had done her even best to do what must be done. She did not know the words to say, or the stations she was meant to stop at with the crown, or any of the nonsense about anointing. She had never troubled herself to learn, assuming that her life would be spent far from court and even further from kings and queens. Some courtier or another popped in and out to whisper in her ear, and though she was blushing and stumbling over her words the whole way, Harmony managed to make it through to the end.

She stood at her brother's side as he stared out into the waiting crowd of Espher's finest, lowered the circlet onto his brow, taking care to rest it on his ears so it didn't slip, and then with that done bent lower still to plant a kiss on his cheek. The last part was not traditional, but Artemio had to admit that it had a nice flair to it. If anything were to be carried forward from this farcical event, he hoped that it would be that, rather than the crowning family member having to be garbed in thunder lizard bones.

Hours followed after the crowning, people that he had to meet and greet. Dignitaries from foreign lands who wanted to be here and show their admiration, while wilting away at the slightest indication that they might offer actual support to Espher in this time of crisis. The head of every great house, and the head of every other house that still considered itself to be great despite all evidence to the contrary.

The only one that Artemio took any particular pleasure in was the visit of the Prima of Septembra. He needed to make no pretenses with her, as though they were strangers and had no history. When she came to the dais upon which he was enthroned he sprang up to embrace her. He could feel her chuckling into his robes, though her face was back to a restrained smile by the time that she had returned to her upright position. "Thank you for granting me the honor of bearing witness to this glorious event, your Highness."

"Glorious event indeed. I only know half these people, and what I do know I'd rather not." She tittered politely, unsure of her place with him now that he had ascended. He would do all he could to put her mind at ease. "And what nonsense is this about granting you the honor? Were it not for you I'd still be sitting in a library while Covotana burned down around us."

"Your highness, I highly doubt that." There was a familiar sparkle back in her eye now. "You do not strike me as the type of man to sit and do nothing while crises arise."

"It is easier to strike a dragon in flight than to pin you with a compliment or thanks." He found he was genuinely smiling despite all the pomposity of the day. "You certainly put me where I could do the most good. Will you accept that at least?"

"I will concede that point, your highness." She answered drily.

"Do not ever want for anything, Prima." He laid a hand on her shoulder before she could drift out of reach. "Just ask and it will be yours."

Her eyes widened in surprise, but she kept her voice level. "Thank you, your highness."

It was not that he was offering support to the only person that he knew that he could trust in this den of vipers, it was that he was doing so publicly. He was setting the standard by which the Prima was to be treated, lest the king's ire be brought down. When he said that he would grant her anything that she asked for, what he truly meant was that everyone else in the room should grant her whatever she asked for. This was the weight of a king's words. This was why he could not misspeak again for so long as he lived, lest the misinterpretation tear lives apart.

He was startled to find Orsina at his elbow when he sank back down into his throne. She had not numbered among the great many nobles that he was due to greet that day, perhaps an oversight, given the importance of her personal power, but he had fallen into the trap of familiarity with her, assuming that she was his without any need to politick for her. It may have been true, thanks to her relationship with Harmony, but it would not do anyone any good to think that he was snubbing her.

She just stood there staring at him for the longest moment, eyes trailing up the length of him to take in the crown nestled on his flaming locks. He cleared his throat and she blinked. "I truly meant what I said earlier. I could not be happier to see you alive and well. I only wish that I could have escaped from the war at home so that I might have devoted myself to your rescue too."

There was an odd lightness to her voice when she smiled at him. "Harmony did fine."

"Of that I have no doubt, my dear sister was ever the more competent of us."

A breeze seemed to be blowing through the chamber, a chill wind passing over the back of his neck as they spoke. For a moment, he almost glanced down to see how many shadows showed around her feet, but that would have involved standing up again, and whether he wanted her seen as valued or not, if he were to spring to his feet the moment that she came close, it would certainly start rumors that he could not afford at this juncture.

“We’ll need to talk about what’s coming.”

With the loss of Cadence, he was now confronted with the unenviable task of finding a wife for himself. One that would unite Espher under one banner or solicit the involvement of some foreign power in the impending invasion by the Agrantine. To have anyone think that he was dallying with some lesser noblewoman just because of a friendship would be disruptive to that purpose. He’d have to endeavor to ensure that they always had a chaperone or a full war council present in the future when the two of them met and ensure that he kept all kindness towards her in check.

“I’m sure that we can arrange a meeting after the feast? Perhaps in the...”

She finished his sentence for him with words he’d never have chosen. “The gardens. On the roof.”

“I have no fond memories of that place.” He tried not to wince as the heat in his stump grew unbearable for just a moment as his thoughts turned to the gardens, to the battle, to the pain.

“It’s where Yelena’s roosted.”

Just one word was all it took to snap him out of it. “I’m sorry, roosted?”

He found once more that he could not catch the girl’s eye. It was less like she was disinterested, and more that she was simply looking at something else that he could not see. It was unsettling, to say the least. “Suggest a better place for her. She’ll move.”

Whatever semblance of manners they’d managed to drill into this peasant girl seemed to have been wiped away by her time in the company of savages. He was careful not to let his fixed smile slip, but he would definitely have to have words with Harmony about the respect it was necessary for her pet to show to the king. Beneath his breath, he grumbled. “A few ripe suggestions come to mind.”

Orsina’s head cocked to the side but it was apparent that she wasn’t listening to him. “She needs to discuss... papers? No... treaty. Alliance. She want’s discuss terms of alliance.”

Once again, Artemio found himself blindsided. “The dragon wishes to form an alliance with Espher.”

“All that dwells on the earth shall be yours, all in the sky hers. Hunting rights...” Orsina began reciting terms by rote before Artemio cut her off.

“I suspect it would be best to have this conversation in person.”

She shrugged her shoulders. But it was an odd gesture. Like she had forgotten how it was done and was repeating it from a distant memory. “Kagan is with her, when you’re ready.”

“I assume that you and my sister will be in attendance also?”

The mention of Harmony seemed to break through whatever clouds surrounded Orsina’s head. She blinked, and then a soft smile appeared on her face. “Of course.”

“Then perhaps I shall give you both some time to bathe first?” He offered her a small smile of his own in return, the kind that any king might offer in polite conversation, no more.

“Huh.” She truly seemed to return to herself in that moment, looking down at her tattered rags and noticing the crusting of filth that yet clung to her. “You know how you can’t smell something until someone points it out?”

“A servant will be happy to guide you to the baths.”

A blush began to spread across Orsina’s cheeks. “Thanks.”

“Oh no,” Artemio chuckled as she departed, “Thank you.”

Alone once more he looked out across his throne room. His palace. His people. He had chosen this. It had been the best choice for Espher, and that had driven the decision, but it had still been his decision. He had chosen to be king. He had chosen this incredible burden of duty. He had no need of old dead kings whispering in his mind about how difficult everything was going to become as a result of that choice.

Because of the choices that he had made, Espher would survive and that made any cost worth paying.

2 - Grim Counsel

Gemmazione, Regola Dei Volpe 1

Two weeks passed by as though they had never been there at all. Harmony found that her duties as sister to the king were many in number, but very low in excitement. Some awkwardness of formality meant that when a female noble wanted to bring something to the king subtly, it was typically done via the queen, and in lieu of one of those, it seemed that she was being forced to fit the bill. All day long, she received a veritable forest's worth of invitations, requests for audiences, and most troublingly notes of admiration from suitors.

She did not know if she was considered a weak point in Artemio's defenses to be exploited, or if all of the young men of Espher had been secretly bubbling over with lust for her for years, unable to express it due to her social station. She'd wager it was the former. Regardless, there were enough important people, or sons of important people, in the mix that she was obliged to at least meet with the majority of them and hope that her personality was sufficient to convince them to stop their pursuit.

Thus far, she had been unsuccessful in dissuading anyone, but she was at least allowed to put the majority of them off with excuses since yet more of her time was eaten up in Artemio's company, serving as his chaperone whenever there was anyone vaguely feminine in the vicinity. It got her closer to the action of court, but as it turned out, the action of court was also heartbreakingly boring.

If she had known that Artemio becoming king would have led to this perpetual state of boredom, then she probably would have tried to remain a social pariah. She had all the good graces of her lessons in childhood to fall back on but found herself to be rusty in matters of manners, and when conversation turned to the weather for the fifteenth time in the day, she felt like screaming. How was she meant to know whether it was a beautiful spring day with a delightful breeze when all of these people kept demanding her time in the palace. She couldn't even remember the last time she'd seen sunlight, except through stained glass. For all that she knew the whole of Covotana could have been blown away.

The rooftop gardens had been commandeered by the First Dragon of Espher, converted into some sort of raggedy nest, so she could not even escape up there to get some fresh air. Not unless she wanted lungs full of venom and for Kagan to come running from wherever he spent his time to serve as translator. The two of them may have found a polite equilibrium with one another after their travels, but it was difficult to carry a conversation when you were missing out on a third of it.

Worse yet, it seemed that as many people as were courting her, an even number were making overtures towards Yelena. To be a prized social commodity could have been a nice ego boost, if she weren't competing with a lizard and coming up short. The only comfort she had was that Kagan was suffering as much as her, serving as the dragon's chaperone and translator.

And so she was left with but a single comfort in her life. Those precious moments where she could withdraw from public life to the suite of rooms that had technically been set aside for the king's mother when the palace was under one round of reconstruction or another. When she could be alone with Orsina at last.

Even that was not as simple as she had expected it to be.

The door shuddered shut behind her, closing out the watchful eyes of the guards that trailed after her everywhere. What few servants spent their time scurrying around this wing, she had summarily dismissed as swiftly as possible, making clear to them that she never wanted to see them while she was in her chambers. Given how much of her days were spent elsewhere, it did not put undue pressure on the staff. Though even if it was, she did not think that she could bring herself to care. "I'm home."

Her voice echoed out through the chambers to no response, but in this, nothing was unusual. Orsina was always there, at least when Harmony came back, but where before the conversation between them had flowed like wine, it seemed to have been stoppered.

It was difficult not to take it personally. She had confessed her love to Orsina, kissed her, done everything that she knew to do, to make her intentions clear, and now the girl who had been so overwhelmingly warm that it had defrosted Harmony's heart had turned cold.

She did not push, wouldn't be so crass even if circumstances were different, but in particular because she still did not fully understand all that Orsina had suffered while captive. There had been no signs of harm on her, no torture or torment beyond the discomfort of confinement, but nonetheless something had changed.

Something that had started from the moment that Yelena had come into their lives.

To be jealous of a dragon was ridiculous. She knew that. Yet all of the free and easy talks that she'd once had with Orsina now seemed to be interspersed with an unheard commentary from the beast above them. She could only imagine that it was this newfound connection that had prompted Orsina's transformation. That the dragon was constantly a presence in her thoughts, even when it did not speak. That was the only thing that had changed. So it must have been the cause. Why else could it be that Orsina no longer met her eye unless prompted? Why else could it be that she was not welcomed home to her beloved with open arms?

There had been a small library in her quarters, given over mostly to genealogies and biographies. It had been rapidly expanded as all of the books that Artemio had abandoned in her quarters back at the House of Seven Shadows had been stealthily shipped over without anyone asking her anything or saying a word. It was here that Orsina seemed to spend most of her time, so far as Harmony could see.

Strictly speaking, she was still Shadebound to the Crown, having been granted the royal station by the Cerva. There had been no replacement selected in her absence, so all of the duties that the job entailed were strictly hers.

While Harmony and Artemio were bound by their positions to entertain all parties to ensure the peace and stability of the realm, it seemed that Orsina felt no similar obligation. She had declined easily as many meetings as Harmony had attended, sometimes not even deigning to give answer to requests for an audience. Some of those attempting to reach her had begun filtering through to Harmony now, adding to her workload, and carrying muttered complaints about the arrogance of the young lady from some country estate that nobody had ever heard of.

It was known that Orsina had the king's favor, that her personal power was incomparable, but that did not make her invincible. Quite the opposite in fact, a target was squarely painted upon her back, and while nobody would be foolish enough to call her out directly, it would not take long before the scheming began. Many would already have been scheming, simply because she had the king's favor and power, all that her absence from court was achieving was to grant them ammunition and turn those who would have preferred to be her allies into the arms of those seeking her downfall.

Harmony had told her all of this in no uncertain terms, but what followed could scarcely have even been considered an argument. It was as though Orsina didn't even care. After all of the hard work that they had done to disguise her and teach her, now that she was in a position that all of Covotana's nobility envied, it was as though she had given up entirely.

Within the library, the air was chill and crisp. All the heat that was blanketing the rest of the city had been pushed back, and when Harmony eased herself inside without knocking, she could see her breath. She could also see the reason why.

Orsina sat cross-legged in the center of the room, books arrayed around her in every direction, like the blast radius of some bibliographical explosion. The ones that she was currently reading were not on the floor. They drifted in a slow orbit about her, held up by invisible hands, pages fluttering as they passed behind her and only stilling for those moments that they passed in front of her blank stare.

So far as Harmony could tell, she was reading the books. Though how one person could read a half dozen books at the same time, switching every two pages, Harmony couldn't even begin to grasp. Art had always been a swift reader, so perhaps it was something to do with being shadebound, the way that they had to split their attention. One thing that Art had never done was spend his life so freely for such a bizarre convenience. Every shade that was circling Orsina was being paid in the moments of her life for performing their task, and though it seemed that the font that Orsina could draw on was seemingly bottomless thanks to her connection with Yelena, it still seemed a ridiculously frivolous application of her power.

"Orsina?"

She did not turn, but Harmony could make out the quirk of a smile tugging at the corner of Orsina's lips. "Orsina. I'm home. Tear yourself away from your terribly exciting books and come talk to me."

"They aren't all that exciting."

Harmony caught the book orbiting closest by her, barely even feeling a tug before it came away in her hand. She flipped it shut and looked at the spine. “Political Upheavals of the Early Volpe Dynasties. How could that be any less than riveting?”

“If you’re worried I’m having too much fun without you, you needn’t bother.”

The orbiting books cycled slowly down towards the ground, as though the air beneath their wings had been snatched away. They settled amidst the debris of the previous session’s reading, just another concentric circle amidst so many others. The chill began to ease, and Harmony breathed easier, “I’m more worried that you’ll start citing historical precedent in every conversation like Art does. I love the boy dearly, but he is a shockingly dry conversationalist.”

Orsina still wasn’t all the way back to herself. Her eyes still stared out blankly. Her lips still moved, as though she were reading something. At least she’d finally stopped needing to follow her finger along the pages. “Showing off everything I’ve learned isn’t really the point.”

“Then what is the point, precisely? You lock yourself in here, night and day, I barely even get to see you.” Harmony had not meant for the last part to sound quite so like a petulant pout, but the truth of the matter was that she would have been more than willing to overlook all of her loves other eccentricities and the abandonment of her duties if it had meant that they were spending the time together.

Orsina blinked hard, and Harmony couldn’t help but wonder if it was the first time she’d done so all day. Then in something more like her own voice than the dry and crackling simulacrum that had been created to answer questions before she sighed. “I need to understand what is happening.”

Harmony resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She had thought that they were past this sort of wavering in the girl’s resolve. “I’ve told you that I’m more than happy to take your audiences with you if you’re worried about slipping up when talking to the nobles. It would be my pleasure, honestly. And if you’re worried that you’ll slip up and not understand something that they’re saying because you don’t know the whole history of everything, I can assure you that the fact you’ve even troubled to crack open a book makes you among the most educated nobles in Espher.”

“It isn’t about that either. There are... there are things happening.” She allowed Harmony to help her to her feet as she fumbled her way through her words. There were big thoughts bubbling inside her head. Too big to squeeze their way out from between her lips. “Things that could change the whole world, and I’m in the middle of them all and I feel like... I feel like I’m a little girl again. Like I don’t know why anything is happening, or where it might lead to. I need to understand.”

Harmony led her out of the library by the elbow like she was some invalid elderly aunt and let out a sigh of relief when she kicked the door shut behind them. There was absolutely nothing otherworldly about that place, except that it was where Orsina spent so much of her time. Even so, it felt haunted to Harmony. “You really don’t need to understand everything. Art’s king now,

we can just go along with whatever he's saying, lean back in the saddle and relax a little. We aren't in charge. We don't have to carry the burden of making every decision."

"And what if Artemio chooses wrong?"

In any other place within the palace, that would have been considered sedition. If anyone else had heard it, then it would have provided all of the ammunition and more to see Orsina stripped of her role in court, if not her title itself. But Harmony was not any other person, and she too was struggling with the supposition of her brother's newfound omniscience. The idea that Art was infallible, when she had been the one to patch his torn trouser knees when he fallen and taught him how to achieve some of the most basic behaviors of a normal person was laughable. He would always be her little brother, her burden to protect, and a little ring of metal on top of his head wasn't liable to change that any time soon. "Then that's his prerogative as king, and we're all meant to just pretend it was the right choice anyway. Don't you remember our lessons. The king's always right. Even when he's wrong. Especially when he's wrong."

"I've got... This thing that I can do. It means that I can change things. I can... if I decide something will be one way, I can make it that way." Orsina still seemed to be struggling to say what she meant. To put all of her muddled thoughts into a line and spit them out. "I can make everyone accept that that is the way things are going to be. If I don't... if I just throw up my hands and say it's somebody else's job to decide for me then what's the point of having that power at all?"

Letting her hand trail down from Orsina's elbow to her hand, Harmony interlaced their fingers. "Well, the point is that you get to lounge around very comfortably and give me all of the love and affection that I'm clearly craving."

It had been a joke, but Orsina was struck by it as though she'd been hit with a hammer. Her shoulders slumped, and there was a shine to her eyes that had nothing to do with unblinking hours and everything to do with sorrow. It was so immediate that Harmony wanted to curse herself and snatch her own words back.

Orsina squeezed her hand. "Forgive me. I've been... distracted."

"Well of course you have," She squeezed right back. "It sounds as though you've been trying to understand the entirety of human history and use it to predict the future. That's enough to get anyone's head turned around. I feel a little dizzy just talking about it, and I haven't been staring at books all day."

They settled themselves upon one of the many couches scattered through the apartments, next to a fire that had been set but not lit, mostly because the additional heat might have actually resulted in everyone present melting. Orsina stared at the unlit logs for a long moment, then her brain seemed to catch up to current events. "Uh, yes. How did your meeting with the horse people go?"

"The Duchy of Brunelleschi would be delighted to provide us with all the horse we need to re-establish our cavalry at the price offered, provided that we can wait the two or three years to foal

them.” Harmony leaned back on the sofa and was quietly delighted to find Orsina sink back too, tucking her head into the crook of Harmony’s arm.

She glanced up at Harmony, and the older woman could swear that she felt her heart stop for just a moment as she looked down into them. “We don’t have two years.”

“No, we most certainly do not. Art is reaching out to some merchants that trade further east, hoping that someone somewhere has enough horses just laying around unused. Although of course, if we do happen upon them, and they’re so far afield, they still may not make it in time.”

The moment seemed to be fading, Harmony’s heart was beating steady once more, if a little swift. Orsina cuddled herself in closer and looked back at the dead fire. “So I guess we just, won’t have cavalry?”

“The one advantage that we held over the Agrantine army was their lack of mobility, and now it is gone.” Harmony tried not to sound too much like Artemio, even though she did find herself to be entirely too much like him sometimes. For instance, her refusal to let things pass even when they were doing no harm. “Also, the meeting with the Duchess of Brunelleschi was yesterday. Today was mostly domestic affairs.”

Orsina gasped. “You’ve been cheating on me, in a house?”

Harmony squeezed her closer, and for a moment it felt like everything was back to the way that it should have been. “So all that sharp wit hasn’t been blunted on books then?”

She chuckled back, “I still have my moments.”

That was a little too close to the truth to bear. There were moments throughout the day when Orsina seemed entirely herself again, when she would smile and joke and laugh. When she would blush as Harmony drew her in for a soft kiss and her heart would beat faster. But most of the time, it was as though she were absent from her own body, lost in her thoughts, and kissing her was like Harmony pressing her lips against one of the statues of the palace.

She changed the subject. “Would you care to join me for some dinner? Perhaps a glass of wine?”

“I suppose that I could be tempted.”

Harmony reached up to unfasten the top button of her dress. “Oh well if temptation is the name of the game, then I’m severely overdressed for the occasion.”

Orsina reached up and refastened the button, giggling all the way. “It’s a wonder that you haven’t got a dozen scandals to your name already.”

“Oh we’ve only been in power a few weeks, I’ve got plenty of time to rack them up.” She leaned down to kiss Orsina, at last. “Poor Art will be pulling out his hair.”

Orsina did not blush, her eyes did not flutter shut. She stared blankly at Harmony, as though they were strangers, though their lips were only a breath away from touching. “He wants to see us.”

Harmony almost growled, “When?”

“Now.”

She looked around the room. “I’m sorry, did a messenger just deliver something while we were talking, and I missed it.”

Orsina untangled herself from Harmony’s arms and rubbed at her own temples. “They’re having a war council.”

Harmony got to her feet and smoothed out her dress. It would have to do for one more meeting. “That seems a little premature when we haven’t even got a war yet.”

“They’ve set up some big table by Yelena’s nest.” Orsina winced. “She’s... fussing about it.”

“Oh I see, the message is by dragon mail.”

Now a blush appeared on Orsina’s cheeks. Long overdue. “Artemio said... I couldn’t ignore his message this way.”

It was Harmony’s turn to press her fingers against an impending headache. “Please tell me you haven’t been ignoring royal summons the same way you have all the dinner invitations and suitors?”

Orsina cast a guilty glance to the stack of unopened notes on the table. “Not that I noticed?”

“Oh, Orsina.” Harmony’s mouth snapped shut as she realised just how alike her mother she had sounded in that moment. Not angry, but disappointed.

“I don’t have time for all these... people.” Once more, Orsina seemed to be losing her ability to string her words together coherently. “They all want... I don’t even know what they all want. They all want a piece of me. To lay claim to me and say I belong to them. To use me.”

This was an old refrain that Harmony herself could remember singing back when she was first coming out into the world of nobility. The complex interconnections of alliances and enmities, hinted at through conversation but obscured from plain sight was a frightening, stifling and amorphous thing. “This is the nature of life in court, I’m afraid.”

“I don’t want to belong to anyone else. I’m so tired of being... caged.” Orsina’s stare had turned blank once more. Chill air blew through the chambers again, setting both of them shivering for a moment before they could recover their composure.

Harmony tried to shrug it off, straightening out her clothes and heading for the door. “We’d best get going.”

It seemed that Orsina wasn’t quite done.

She stood staring into the unlit fire, cold radiating through her as she whispered, barely loud enough for Harmony to hear. “I won’t submit again. I won’t be a prisoner. *I will not go back into the dark.*”

The pain in her voice, the fear, it was frightening.

Harmony wet her lips carefully, then said. “Orsina?”

“Yes.” She did not meet Harmony’s eye, but she did move. Reaching out a hand so that a cloak leapt from where it had been dumped upon another chair to sweep around her shoulders. “We should go.”

There were so many questions that Harmony was almost frightened to ask, and none of them could be voiced in front of the guards. Every whisper in the halls of a king became a rumor, and every rumor grew legs and took off running. Just a fragment of the things she should really have been asking Orsina about could make it around the world and back by morning, carrying with it the most awful change. In a way, she could perfectly understand why Orsina was avoiding being heard at all.

The abrupt change of plans for the evening came with only one real benefit. The small horde of hangers on, secretaries and dignitaries that had attached themselves to Harmony’s coat-tails had dropped off so she could breathe as they hiked up the stairs to the roof without almost choking on perfume or insipid conversation.

Most likely she should have taught Orsina about perfumery, the meanings of the different floral scents and how it could be used to convey a message, but she couldn’t bring herself to. The honest scent of soap and sweat had always been all that had filled Harmony’s nose when they embraced and depriving herself of that felt like too great a cruelty. They’d been parted for so long, and even now that they were together again, Orsina was so different that there were moments Harmony couldn’t even understand how she had travelled so far from who she used to be. When Orsina was a hollowed-out stranger in Harmony’s arms, and that scent was the only thing keeping her heart from breaking.

The gardens atop the palace had changed rapidly since the coming of Yelena. Everything had been cleared off the flat expanse around the dragon by some truly terrified laborers. All the rubble and soil that had been all that was left of the decorative roses swept away. All the remaining structures hauled down before they could be knocked down by an accidental twitch of the tail. Now the gardens had become a flat stone table protruding from the keep’s side, the furthest half filled with scaled flesh, the intermediate area dotted patches of soot and bones from the many whole carcasses that Yelena gleefully roasted and devoured. The table by the door had been the latest addition, set as far forward as the courage of the servants carrying it out would allow, which was scarcely enough to get it away from the wall far enough to squeeze chairs in.

Shadebound might have had power enough to face off against a dragon, but the servants were not shadebound. Nor were the vast majority of the nobles. They lived in terror of the beast that now dwelled among them.

Initially plans had been made for them to be reconstructed as they had been as a sort of memorial to Queen Cadence, who it seemed had died in some sort of meaningful sacrifice amidst the chaos in the palace.

There had been much to concern Harmony during her adventure to the north, enough that her mind had scarcely turned towards her brother at all, despite her having been raised to serve as his

protector. The fact that the Agrantine had laid hands on him at all, let alone lopped one from his body, served as clear evidence of just how badly she had been needed in Covotana. Evidence that Art really couldn't be left alone to fend for himself, no matter his many protestations.

He was already seated at the midpoint of the table, Baroness Granchio at his right hand, and the seat to his left open for Orsina. There was only one chair on the other side, double the size of those where kings and lordlings stiffly sat, Kagan was the only one with courage, or knowledge, enough to sit with his back to the dragon, and as he served most often as her mouthpiece, it was a fitting arrangement.

Harmony could not help but note that no seat had been set aside for her. She supposed that as the sister of the king she now qualified as a princess, and princesses rarely seemed to find themselves on war councils. Queens, certainly. Duchesses, apparently. But a princess was some delicate waif that fainted at the thought of blood. The title fit Harmony so poorly it was laughable.

They proceeded in tense silence to the table with all eyes upon them, and with horror Harmony realised what was about to happen a moment before it did, Orsina arrived at the chair by the king's side and pulled it out to offer it to Harmony.

Already tension had the air thrumming, but now it was palpable. Harmony had not been invited to this council, and now it appeared that Orsina was rebuking the king for the oversight, offering up her own place at the table. Overruling his judgement. For those jackals just waiting for her to make a faux pas, it was as though all of their birthdays had come early.

Harmony stepped behind Artemio's shoulder and forced her body to relax. Brother and sister they may have been, but that was not their only relationship. She was his impresario, and it would do well for others to remember that she was his bodyguard, and this was her rightful place. She glanced over at Orsina only briefly and hoping that she might take the hint.

Orsina was not taking the hint. She was staring at Harmony with mounting confusion, forcing her to speak. "Very kind of you to offer, Shadebound Royal, but I have been sitting in meetings all day, my legs could use a stretch."

There were some chuckles from around the table, and Orsina slipped into her allotted place without further comment. All Harmony could do was hope that whatever was discussed this day held enough excitement to keep this moment from the memory of those gathered.

"We are at war, ladies and gentlemen of the court. Though there are no soldiers marching upon us, and no soldiers yet on the field, it has been declared." Artemio must have been practicing his royal voice, it brought abject silence to the whole table. Even the rumbling of the dragon's breathing seemed to fall silent as he rose.

"Agrant spat in our eye with their little visit, that's true enough, but is that enough for us to be calling it a war?" Duchess Granchio had never shied away from speaking her mind. It was why she had always done so well on the battlefield and so poorly in court.

Art's shoulders lowered ever so slightly; the layers of capes thrown about him shrinking down by his ears by so little it was almost comical. "The emperor's wife died here, by my hand. It is not a slight that he will let pass."

"Hasn't he got a hundred more where that came from, you'd think you'd done him a favor thinning the herd." Duke Cigno was thick in waist and beard. Easy to spot in any room. It was a small mercy that he was not surrounded by his usual blue cloud of pipe-smoke.

Some lord that Harmony didn't know took up the same scoffing tone. "Agrant is in land wars across a dozen fronts to the south, there's not a chance that they'd march on us in force."

Duchess Ragna, Harmony knew all too well. She was always ready with the kind of sharp-tongued comment that filtered down to its intended target days, if not weeks after she'd uttered it. "The emperor has always been a reasonable man, if he knew that some of his forces went rogue and invaded an ally then..."

Art did them all a favor and cut the woman off. "He gave full sanction to the invasion."

Duke Anatra was a less common sight around town than his wife, always more of a merchant or bookkeeper than a proper lord, by the estimations of his fellows. He wore small, round eyeglasses, and was pleasantly rotund, but seemed to have all his clothes tailored just a little too tight, giving him the faint appearance of a jovial beetle. "But was it truly an invasion? There were a few saints here, no denying that, but it was hardly the full force that the Agrantine could bring to bear, was it? More like an expedition gone awry. Diplomacy taken too far."

Art managed a small smile for the man who had become one of the first allies to the Volpe's return first to court, then to power. It was becoming increasingly apparent that all of that had been the work of his wife. Regardless, it behooved him to treat the man like he was on the right side of the argument, even when he was not. "I've heard it said that war is the final permutation of diplomacy."

Ragna picked up on the shift in conversation and attempted to press her advantage. "So would it not serve us best to send envoys to the emperor, explain what happened here..."

This time Artemio actually raised his hand to bring her speech to a halt. "During the rout, no shortage of saints fled. He will have had a full report by now. I see no need to waste further time reiterating the finer points."

Of all the assembled lords and ladies at this table, the only one that had ever been directly antagonistic in the past was the Duke Cavalla, but his disdain had been directed almost exclusively towards Kagan, and those that sought to protect him. The fact that he now had to sit across the table from the Arazi as an equal clearly stung him. "But if we are to marshal our forces, it will serve as clear provocation to him."

"He is provoked, Duke Cavalla." Artemio let out a huff of breath, almost a sigh. "That is done. What we need turn our attention to now is the means that we shall survive the aftermath of that provocation."

“They’ll march at the end of Gemmazione.” Granchio piped up so swiftly it made Harmony wonder if Art had coached the woman before the meeting and run lines. “Agrant has a standing army, no need to raise levees or banners. But with all their wheeled contraptions, they’ll favor the dry season.”

“Assuming that they mean to march on us at all.” Ragna snipped back.

“Let us work off that assumption for now, shall we. Call this situation hypothetical if you must. What I need to know is can we be ready for them come the season’s end?”

There was a great deal of muttering and grumbling from along the length of the table. Nobody in their right mind wanted to use the word ‘no’ when addressing their king, but reality had an unfortunate habit of overpowering the whims of royals and peasants alike.

“The fight with the dragon-lords depleted our numbers. Our cavalry are in tatters. Our footmen in not much better shape.” Some lesser lord was speaking, one that had made himself useful enough to be invited to meetings such as this, rather than born to such power that his attendance was mandated. It was the sort of role that Art probably would have sought out, if things had gone differently. “All of the conscripts have been returned to their farms for the planting season. To raise them again before seasons end, we’d see starvation. Widespread starvation.”

Granchio leaned forward to drag a bowl of olives into easier reach. “And hungry men don’t fight.”

“Two options present themselves. To purchase the grain needed for the coming year from foreign merchants and be at their mercy.” Anatra tilted his hand from side to side with the palm down, as though balancing the fate of the kingdom on its plump back. “Or to leave our peasantry where they belong and to spend that same coin on mercenaries instead.”

Once more Artemio seemed to resist the urge to sigh or wilt where he could be seen.

“Mercenaries are not an option. Agrantine pockets run deeper than ours by far, and I’d rather they weren’t bribed out from under us when the time for fighting comes.”

Anatra slapped his wobbling hand down on the table. “Then we must open negotiations to trade, begin rationing, seize all that can be had from our lands now and let the fields lay fallow for the year.”

Artemio glanced to Granchio, his right-hand woman. She was sitting where Harmony had always assumed that she would sit. “Will it be sufficient?”

“The treasury will empty before our neighbors run out of grain to sell us, if that’s the fear?”

Artemio’s lips drew tight. “Will there be sufficient supply to support the populace?”

“Most of them, certainly. It’ll be a lean year for them, but they’ll live through it, less they were already going hungry.”

With a nod to Anatra, Art made his decision. “Make the necessary inquiries.”

There was no physical list in front of Artemio. He had never needed one when his memory was so very efficient. Yet, Harmony had the sense that item one was now ticked off. “In terms of replenishing the cavalry...”

There was a momentary silence, then Harmony realised that the question was being directed at her. “We won’t have it. Nobody has enough horse to hand over even for ready money, and foaling and raising, they all take time. If they were coming next year instead of this, we might be back to half strength.”

Granchio grumbled. “Without full strength, they aren’t liable to leave a mark on the bloody Agrantine. They’ll just be a distraction. Easy pickings.”

“And of course, we do not have a year.” Artemio leaned back in his chair and let his crown knock on the graven wood.

“What about the dragon?” Lord Cavalla pointed across at Yelena where she sat, unmoving, like some vast serpent on a sun-soaked rock. Her eyes did not move, nor did she blink. It was unsettling, to say the least. And having spent some small amount of time in the dragon’s company by now, having messages relayed to her through Kagan and Orsina, it seemed like exactly the kind of thing that Yelena would do specifically to unsettle people that she did not like. It was less that she was a spiteful creature, and more that she had the heart of a jester beating within that great scaled chest. “We could not ask for better mobility than flight.”

Kagan leaned forward and set his elbows on the table. Despite the age and sturdiness of the oak, it creaked. “Yelena can’t carry your troops. She can’t replace supply lines. Dragons aren’t horses. One can’t replace the other.”

Cavalla scoffed. “But I suppose that at some point she will serve some purpose beyond culling our livestock?”

Yelena slowly turned her head to focus one great golden eye upon the lord where he sat near to the end of the table. Smoke drifted up from her nostrils, floating up to form a cloud above them. Her serpentine neck extended, just ever so slightly, so that she was moving towards the man. So that there could be no doubt at all that when Kagan spoke his next words, they were coming from her. “You can rely on that.”

Artemio was forced into the role of peacemaker once more, and it suited him poorly. Nothing showed on the carefully schooled expression that he showed to the gathered council, but Harmony knew her brother all too well. Knew the tightening of his shoulders and the grimace that used to accompany it before he’d learned better. He thought that those who ruled should have been above such petty arguments. That they should be ruled themselves by reason. The reality seemed to be a constant disappointment to him. “Both our shadebound and new ally can be relied upon to counter the more esoteric tactics that the Agrantine bring to bear, but they cannot replace the necessity of an actual army.”

Baroness Granchia let out a little huff of what might have been laughter. “With respect to your highness, I was at the battle of Selvaggia, and I’d wager our girl there could stand toe to toe with any army in the world.”

Not all of the gathered lords and ladies had fought the Arazi. Most of them had been mysteriously busy with more pressing concerns when the time came to lay down their lives for Espher. But even among their cowardly number Harmony could see heads nodding.

Some of it may well have been the all too familiar abdication of responsibility, passing the burden of waging war and raising armies to but a single girl of twenty years probably appealed to them greatly, because they could not grasp the existential threat hanging over them. They still thought only in terms of the advantages that the coming days could bring them. Still failing to understand that all the gold in the world could not be spent from beyond the grave.

Others would have seen Orsina facing the dragons that came to strike at Covotana herself, seen her flying like a dragon herself, rending scale and wing by the power of her shades. They might have had some inkling of what she had proven herself capable of. On the one hand it was a terrible burden to place on anyone, but on the other, Harmony could not help but feel pleased that Orsina's worth was known. It would keep her safe from their treachery if they all viewed her as invaluable.

The only one who did not benefit from someone else being seen as omnipotent was the person who was actually meant to be in charge. "I am certain that everyone here has at least a passing grasp upon the limits of Shadebound. Potent as Lady Aceta had proven herself to be, she is not limitless. And we are aware that despite their own rejection of an arcane tradition, the Agrantine field preternatural forces of their own, drawn from among their vassal states. Boggling our own shadebound down in the grind of direct conflict is liable to leave us vulnerable to such measures. If this does not prove to be the case, then they can be dispatched to where they will serve best with some degree of haste."

There were some exchanged glances among the council. Some rumor they thought was being confirmed. "If his majesty wishes to keep the Lady Aceta close, I'm certain nobody can fault him for that."

Artemio did not stiffen or pry at that comment any further. He had more sense. "The cavalry, my lords and ladies. Does anyone have a proposal to resolve the problem?"

If he'd wanted to silence any whispers, there could have been no more effective bludgeon to the quiet waltz of conversation than that. Perhaps some of them did have ideas, but none would take the risk of putting one forward and leave themselves open to criticism if it failed. So Espher's leadership remained stagnant, as it always had under every king.

The silence stretched out for so long that Harmony herself was almost ready to jump in and give them her limited overview of the situation, even though she had not been invited and was not meant to be here at all.

"Archers." Kagan's voice cut through the long silence.

Duke Anatra startled at the sudden rumble. "I beg pardon, Arazi?"

"Horse archers. You haven't got enough beasts and bodies for lancers, but a season's long enough to train archers to ride." Kagan leaned back a little. As though realizing he'd

overcommitted. “Well enough to fight at least. If your Agrants are as slow as you say, you could pepper their lines with no problem. Hit and run.”

Cavalla scoffed once more. Doing what all these lords and ladies had always done, tearing down any idea but their own. “How could anyone fire arrows from the back of a horse?”

“Steppes-men manage it fine.” Kagan cast a bored gaze in the lord’s direction. “Maybe you should ask them?”

Artemio was not so quick to dismiss the suggestion. “And what do we suppose it will take for them to part with such knowledge?”

The huge man shifted uncomfortably in his seat now that he was the center of attention. “Steel most likely. To trade. Dead men don’t make good teachers.”

Duchess Granchio was the one to shoot him down now. That was a surprise to Harmony, who’d thought that the woman was firmly in Art’s pocket. Perhaps her views really did simply align with his most of the time. “So you’d have us arm the barbarian raiders on our doorstep?”

“I wouldn’t have you do anything.” Kagan crossed his arms. “You asked a question, I answered you.”

“They would be trading their most valuable tactical advantage to us, so it seems a relatively even trade to me. Besides, even if you plated every man of the steppes in steel, they don’t have the numbers to pose a threat.” Artemio was still weighing the thought, examining it from different angles. The fact that he did not already have an argument against it prepared suggested to Harmony that it was a new idea that even he had never considered. Which in turn made it all the more likely that he would latch onto it.

Still, Granchio was displeased at the idea of putting decent weapons into the hands of a people that had spent generations preying on the northern reaches where her lands lay. “Not yet, but a generation from now...”

“Is a problem for tomorrow. We need to survive today.” Artemio did not intentionally cut her off, it was not meant as a snub, and Granchio likely wouldn’t see it that way either. But Harmony could see the eyes of the other lords darting. They thought they could see a gap to wedge themselves into between Granchio and the king, and they would do their damndest to squeeze into it. Art didn’t give them a second thought, giving his command to one of the secretaries lurking back against the wall. “Send out whoever we have that the steppes-men will talk to. Make the trade. Begin retraining those riders that will learn, part the rest from their horses and distribute them to the best archers we have.”

There was a moment of dull silence, then Duke Cigno added his two coppers. “Cavaliers won’t be happy to lose their horses.”

“Then they can study the bow. It is not as though I am giving them no choice.” Artemio waved the concern away. “A half of them probably already hunt from horseback, they can consider it good practice for chasing down forest fowl.”

Kagan piped up again though he seemed reluctant to be seen, let alone heard. “The horses will need training too. Warhorses charge for the enemy; they don’t strafe them. They’re built wrong for it too, but fresh horseflesh isn’t coming, so we’ll need to make do.”

“Let rider and beast learn together then.” Artemio settled back for a moment, sipping on his wine. “At least they will not be lacking company.”

Cavalla, it seemed, had been bubbling with enmity throughout this entire conversation and now at last it boiled over as he barked, “I cannot believe that you plan to turn the finest heavy cavalry in the north into...”

Artemio halted him with a raised hand. Harmony startled at the sight of all the jeweled rings that he was wearing, there must have been a half dozen rings among the crown jewels and he had half the space to display them as his predecessors. “Whatever it takes to win the war, Lord Cavalla. Whatever that might be.”

“At the word of some reptile?”

There was the reason for the simmering resentment finally rearing its ugly head. If it had been the suggestion of one of his fellow nobles, then Cavalla would have fussed over it as surely as this, but the vitriol was coming from his loathing of the Arazi. Of any foreigner. Not simple distaste for a plan.

Once more the table fell silent, the only sound the screeching of Kagan’s seat over the flagstones beneath them as he rose to stand and glower down at Cavalla. With all the time that they’d spent together, Harmony had forgotten just how much bigger he was than a normal man. It wasn’t just his girth and height, but the way that he carried himself. He was garbed in simple robes, borrowed from somebody or other within the palace so that he was not striding about in his Arazi bones, but despite that just the set of his feet and shoulders announced him as a warrior. Where Cavalla’s voice had been raised in anger, his grew softer. Barely more than a rumble felt through the bones. “My blood’s warm as yours. Warmer. Since I’ve got some fire in me, and all you’ve got is piss.”

There could have been no more obvious a challenge, and a duel would have been in the offing were it anyone else offering those words. As it was, little lord Cavalla looked up at the giant of the man without even a knife in his belt, and he wilted.

Artemio came to Cavalla’s rescue. “My lord, if you can present a solution to the problem of cavalry then I’d be more than happy to take your advisement instead?”

A flush crept up Lord Cavalla’s neck, spreading up his cheeks as he spoke. Hot enough to cook an egg on. “Well... I.. that is to say... this course is simply unacceptable. It breaks with... you cannot take a man who has spent his entire life training to be one type of soldier and expect him to become another in a season. It will be chaos. You will destroy what confidence the cavaliers have in their own skill.”

Artemio did not allow him that out. “An alternative, Lord Cavalla?”

Thoroughly defeated, Cavalla seemed to shrink back in on himself. “I... have none at present your highness.”

“Thought is not instant, there is no shame in taking time to ponder a question. Should inspiration strike later, please come to me with suggestions.” Art turned his gaze from his least loved lord to politely include the others in his next demand. “This goes for all of you, though I am now your king, I am still but a single man, with only a single man’s knowledge. I may not always follow your advice, but I shall always give it the weight due to leaders of your experience.”

That statement clearly gave the assembled body of leaders some food for thought. There had been kings that were easily led in the past. Kings that would refuse any idea but their own and insist that the world reshape itself around their words. Artemio was not one of these. He was not either of these. Harmony could almost see the mounting horror on the faces of those who’d meant to manipulate him as they became aware of that fact. He would listen to their thoughts? He would make decisions based on what he thought was best, using what information they provided to him. It was both a blessing and a curse. Gone were the days of tricking the king into supporting whatever pet project that his lords felt the need to pursue, and so too were gone the days of allowing the full burden of guilt for every decision to fall on the king’s shoulders.

Art wet his lips and tried to carry on as though he had not upended their whole world of petty squabbles. “Then might I suggest that we break for some refreshment, and time to consider...”

It was only then that Harmony realized what wasn’t being said. What had been forgotten about entirely, and she found herself forced to blurt out. “What about the Arazi?”

Duke Anatra gave his fellows a little smirk then said, “The Arazi have been defeated, Duchess.”

She did not want to punch him in the face. Punching him in the face would be counterproductive. Nobody would listen to what she had to say if she became known as a face puncher. “They’re coming back. We may have lost them during our escape from their dominion, but they know where we are, they know where Orsina is. They will be coming for her.”

Duchess Granchio laughed. Actually laughed. Harmony couldn’t believe the rudeness. “After the beating that they took the last time that they set foot upon our soil, I should think they’d be reluctant for a repeat performance.”

Her own response came clipped with anger. “It’s a religious matter for them.”

Cavalla piped up in something like support to quip, “And nothing makes a fool of men like a god.”

Artemio finally turned to look at her. “We have positioned watchtowers in the northern reaches, if and when the dragon-lords begin scouting, we will ready ourselves to face them once more. The Agrantine Empire is more than enough of a problem as it stands.”

Ever the bean-counter, Lord Anatra swiftly announced. “We do not have coin enough in our coffers to miss another harvest. The granaries are already low after all the conflict that we have faced. If they come next year then...”

Kagan added his voice in support of Harmony. “They won’t be coming next year. They won’t be coming next winter. They’re probably already on their way.”

Art’s head snapped around, as though he were surprised that anyone else was indulging his sister’s foolishness. “They took massive losses. It will take them time to rebuild their army.”

Harmony did her best to keep her voice level, but she was becoming increasingly frustrated as the conversation went on. Why were they ignoring her? Why was Art turning his back on her? “What we faced was a fraction of the forces they have at their beck and call. Barely a half of their full numbers. They could mount the same sized assault again tomorrow.”

Duchess Granchio grunted. “But they will not, because they have seen it is fruitless to attack with those numbers.”

Harmony silenced her with a glare. “Which buys us days, not years.”

Cavalla scoffed once more. It seemed that the man loved the sound of his own voice too much to consider not wading into conversations where he was not wanted. “What army can mobilize in days?!”

“You were the one saying how fast dragons move.” Kagan may have settled back into his seat, but he clearly had not forgotten the insults from the man earlier. “If they take only the flights of aslinda then they could be upon us tomorrow.”

Anatra paled at the thought. As though his tight clothes had cut off blood supply to his head. “Tomorrow?”

Artemio could not help himself. Even if he wanted to pretend that the situation was hypothetical, it was still a puzzle to be solved. A set of information to be processed. “They will not send only true-dragons. It would be too much of a risk to have them unsupported. They’ve tasted the might of our Shadebound now. They’ll understand their better gamble is not precision but overwhelming our positions.”

“He has the right of it.” Kagan gave a respectful nod to the king. “We’ve got the season, likely enough.”

Duchess Ragna was already pale with all of the makeup that she caked on, but even she looked sickly now. “So we can anticipate the arrival of both Agrantine and Arazi armies simultaneously?”

Anatra whispered. “All is lost.”

“Hardly. The likelihood of both forces taking the field within a week of each other is infinitesimally small.” Artemio was trying to calm his lords and ladies before panic could begin to spread, robbing them all of reason entirely, but he had to contend with both their moods and the facts of the situation.

Granchio tried to help. In her way. “Assuming that the Arazi come at all.”

Kagan let out a disgusted little huff. “Oh, they’ll be coming.”

“I’m unclear why you are doubting my word, my lords.” It was the closest that Harmony could come to openly questioning her treatment, a treatment that was clearly being inspired by the way that her own brother was dismissing her.

“It is not a matter of trust, duchess, but of perspective.” Duke Anatra’s voice had a sharpness to it now, one that seemed entirely out of place coming from his little pink mouth. “In all likelihood, your retrieval of a captive prompted a response from the Arazi, but it does not follow that they will be attempting a full-scale assault to retrieve that single prisoner. But I do not believe that they’d be willing to wage another war of conquest so soon after having their noses bloodied.”

Harmony looked to Orsina for aid. Expecting the one who’d told them so much about the Arazi ways to weigh in and force people to understand the situation, but she remained eerily silent throughout the whole debacle. Kagan was the one to speak up. “They’ll come for her. Its pride for their leader. It’s cause for their crusade.”

Harmony managed a tight lipped smile at Anatra. “They aren’t rational men like you, my lord.”

“When we see evidence of this impending invasion, we shall give it due attention.” Artemio once more tried to dismiss all that they had said.

Anger began to creep into Harmony’s voice despite her best efforts. “Evidence? Orsina was in captivity, listening to their every word. Kagan grew to maturity among them, they know what the Arazi are planning.”

“With respect to both of them, the words that men say and the actions that they take are rarely so closely aligned as to even overlap, let alone serve as sufficient proof of action. All warriors beat their chests and talk of how they will hunt their enemies to the edge of the world, yet the streets are not blocked with their gradual stalking from one end of the continent to another.” Artemio swirled the wine in his glass slowly, savoring the aromas rising from it. He’d always been overly fond of wine, but now that she thought back, Harmony couldn’t recall him consuming more than a few sips throughout the whole meeting. Perhaps becoming king really had changed him in ways other than making him even more of a pompous ass.

Kagan growled in symphony with a rumble from his dragon. “Arazi don’t brag.”

It was Art’s turn to laugh. “Are you certain, I seem to recall you doing a little chest-beating down in the dungeons not so long ago? Your kind are forged in fire?”

There were lanterns spaced along the table so that any papers laid in front of the council could be read clearly. The evening had not yet darkened enough for them to be necessary, but they were there nonetheless. Or at least, they were there until that moment. At which point the glass of every lantern shattered and the flames leapt up a foot in the air. Every one of the nobles flung themselves back at the sudden eruption. Artemio included. Orsina’s voice came to them as if from a great distance, loud enough to be heard like a hiss in each ear, but so soft that the startled secretaries and servants didn’t seem to notice it. “*Enough.*”

Kagan was among those flinching back. There was something beyond surprise on his face when he locked eyes with Orsina. Harmony had rarely seen it in his expression before, except when they ran into his father back in the Arazi lands. Fear.

The pyrotechnics display had the desired effect. All of the infighting, back biting and irrelevant muttering had been brought to a complete halt. And now Artemio, who had felt so confident with her sitting in silence beside him had to give Orsina his undivided attention. “You have something that you wish to say, Shadebound Royal?”

When Orsina’s words bubbled up out of her, the voice might have been hers, but the manner of speaking was guttural. Like she was some peasant farmer yelling at cattle. “Doesn’t matter what you *believe*. Don’t matter what you *say*. They’re *coming*, same as your saints from the south. Pretending won’t do *nothing* but make you blind.”

“So eloquently put.” Duchess Ragna tittered.

“Pissing about with pretty *words* won’t stop them. Fiddling with coffers and grain stores won’t stop them. Nothing will stop them. Nothing but *me*. So why do you keep going in circles pretending otherwise?” If Orsina heard Ragna’s little jibe, she’d paid it no mind. She only had eyes for the king. Only had words for the king. It was as though the rest of them had been forgotten.

“What precisely is your proposal?” Artemio looked nonplussed. The girl that he as accustomed to dealing with was quiet and retiring, a little country mouse. The fact that country mouse had dragged a serpent back to his doorstep still hadn’t dissuaded him of that impression. To hear that mouse now roaring like a lion was understandably surprising to him. But not to Harmony. She had always know that Orsina was a lion. From the first day that they met and she’d snapped back at her, she’d known that there were claws hidden somewhere, but it was the first time she’d ever seen them bared at anyone else.

“I’m what they want. *Give it to them*. Me and Yelena.”

This seemed to be safer ground for Art, he leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “One dragon against a flight...”

Orsina cut him off, and the sputtering remains of the lanterns roared back to life, sending the seated nobles scrambling back once more. “We’re more than *one dragon*.”

This time, Artemio had steeled himself for the explosion. As though he’d been expecting more dramatics. He may have been surprised at Orsina’s behavior, but he’d adapted to it while the others still floundered. “Perhaps, but as I already mentioned, I have no intention of spending you upon a common army when there are more serious concerns to face.”

Harmony didn’t know what to make of Orsina’s outbursts any more than her brother did. If she was making a display of power and ill temper to scare off any more suitors or petitioners, then she was greatly underestimating the allure of such boundless power. Like moths to the flame, the more destructive her demonstrations became, the more these power-hungry fools would be drawn to her. Hungering all the while for more. “More serious than all the dragons in the sky?”

At last, Artemio met her gaze, and while the sardonic grin he showed her was all too familiar, it did not reach his eyes. There were creases around them that had not been there before. Some a sign of aging from the power that he had spent in her absence, some a symptom of the pain that he was struggling so hard to conceal from everyone. “You really are not familiar with the Agrantine, are you?”

Even Granchio seemed taken aback by his cavalier attitude. “You’re more concerned about the Agrantine than the dragon lords?”

“Do you believe that the God-Emperor of Agrant is so named simply because he is of noble birth? That creature has lived centuries, accruing powers a mortal man cannot conceive of. From nothing, he has built an Empire that spans the globe, and you ask me if I have more concern for him than some barbarian princes rutting atop larger than average lizards?” He glanced over to Kagan in the midst of his rant and realized his mistake. “Present company excluded, of course.”

Kagan looked more amused than angry. “Hard not to take some offense there.”

Yelena on the other hand expressed enough rage for both of them, spreading her wings and rearing up behind Kagan with a rumble deep inside her that sounded like nothing more or less than a house tumbling to arson.

Art turned back to address the rest of the table, glancing up to his sister to include her in a way that it had not occurred to him to do until now. “I have faced the Arazi and found them wanting. Only to return home and find that the Agrantine had snatched my kingdom out from beneath me in my absence. Is it any wonder I consider them a greater threat?”

Kagan broke the silence that the question left. “The Arazi had gods once.”

“Let us guess, something dragon shaped?” It seemed that Cavalla had been emboldened by the multiple times that he had not been murdered by Kagan thus far, and now considered him to be fair sport after the king’s slip-up. “Lived in the sky? Are you about to share some folksy wisdom with us?”

“We killed them.” Kagan rose to his feet, stalking over to Yelena and laying a hand upon her neck to calm her as the rumble of flames in the deep still rolled. “Bonded the dragons, came home with their power, slaughtered our gods. Burned them away to nothing.”

Yelena threw back her head and let loose the great gout of flame that had been boiling its way up through her. A beacon of blazing orange ten times the size of the little display that Orsina had put on at the table. From horizon to horizon, anyone might have looked in the direction of the city and seen it. A dragon laying claim to her territory.

When the flame guttered down to a silent hiss, Kagan met Artemio’s implacable stare once more. “The Arazi don’t fear gods because we’ve faced them and found them wanting. Might do you some good to consider that.”

3 - The Spring of Discontent *Gemmazione, Regola Dei Volpe 1*

Yelena stretched out her wings to their fullest extension, bone pinions curving back against the strain, leather creaking. The sun rose over her city, flooding her with warmth. Kagan was settled against her back, flooding her with calm. All was as it should be.

Surging forward, she launched herself off the palace.

There were angled tiled roofs all around her instead of the dead-drop of a cliff that would make taking flight all the easier, and she had to beat her wings furiously to navigate over their gentle curvature. From the sides of the vast white palace, there grew towers and buttresses that had to be ducked and dodged. All the while she was falling, letting gravity carry her down, letting momentum build.

With any other rider, she would have felt the anxiety flowing as she continued to plummet, but Kagan was so deeply embedded in her consciousness after all of these years that their feelings were one. She was not afraid, so he was not afraid. She knew what she was doing, so he knew what she was doing. He might not have approved of such showy behavior, but he understood her well enough to know why she felt the need to perform.

He could not feel fear in her, but everywhere else around them it had gathered in a vast stagnant pool. The fear of what had happened, the fear of what was still to come, and sharp and piercing through it all, fear at the sight of a dragon in their skies.

My skies. Yelena's thoughts whispered into his head. An emotion so strong it took the form of solid communication.

It was a dragon's nature to be territorial, to find a place and claim it as their own. To defend their territory, tooth and nail. To dominate any that would oppose their mastery of their own domain. For Yelena, who had her own territory crushed down so small that she could touch all sides of it when she stretched for so many decades, it was completely unsurprising that at the first opportunity she would lay claim to as vast a domain as she could. What Kagan had not anticipated was her willingness to bind herself to some human power in exchange for that territory. To make a treaty with the new king of Espher and lower herself to the level of one of his feudal servants. It was unnatural. A disruption of the natural order of dragons.

"Your skies, over lands owned by some human."

A dragon did not speak, not when its actions could speak for it. A dragon did not trade, not when it could simply take what it desired. This arrangement that Yelena had made was something new and frightening. Something that felt alien to their way of life. She had always been progressive in a way that other dragons were not, willing to consider new ideas and break from the flight. It had endeared her to Kagan, when the time had come for the selection of bond-mates. It seemed that her imprisonment had not calmed that part of her. Quite the opposite.

It is not the first time I have bound my fate to a human's. If it were, we would not be speaking.

She spread her wings completely once more to catch the rising thermals from the city square below. The city was a gift. The flat planes of terracotta soaking up the heat of the sun and throwing it back up. The ambient heat of the caldera below pushing heat all through the night. Rising up, making every moment in flight so much less of an effort.

Kagan's thighs tightened around her. They would have a saddle and harness made soon enough, the craftsmen of the city had already been given their instruction, but for now it was the strength of their flesh that kept them together as they rose. "I'm Arazi."

We are not Arazi. Irritation rumbled through her, vibrating up his legs. The Arazi worship their god-slayer. The Arazi twist the bond we have to make aslinda their slaves. We are different. There is no word yet for what we are. And what others can become if they free their minds.

He peered down at the people of the city as they banked. All their heads snapped up to stare at the monster in their sky. Fear radiating up from each and every one of them. It prickled up Kagan's back, and he knew that Yelena could feel it to. Exactly what he'd always known he would be confronted with if his nature was revealed to the people of Espher. "You think other aslinda will want this?"

It is how the world should be. How the aslinda should have always been. Dragons spread across the world, ruling the skies, humans ruling the dirt. Both living in harmony.

Back in the old days, they had shared their thoughts on what the Arazi could be, what they should be. Loathing the way that Konus was warping the nature of the aslinda to suit his purposes. Forcing them all into close proximity when it went against their every instinct. The Aslinda were meant to fly, to spread and find their own domain. Konus had made shackles of the bond. Made the Aslinda into a mockery of man.

In their silent moments when they had nothing but their own thoughts to share, Kagan and Yelena had known that it was wrong, but they had been so immersed in the Arazi way that they lacked the perspective to form a coherent image of what the world could have been without it. It seemed that Yelena had devoted her time to philosophical thought while Kagan was more focused on survival.

With a steady beat of wings, Yelena brought them higher, out of the reach of the early morning thermals and into the lowest of the drifting tufts of cloud. Her wings were warmed up now, each stroke of them thundering over the people far below.

What few horses the Espherans had managed to gather up for their new cavalry were set outside of the city walls in a vast corral. Each day that Yelena made her flight, they startled and tried to break free. Their keepers ran about, scowling and trying to calm the beasts, cursing the dragon above them. This was the world that Yelena wanted to live in. "Not sure how harmonious life would be, getting dragged into every squabble."

She had not even bothered to glance down, though he could feel a pang of hunger in her stomach from the rising scent of living meat, tinged with the terror that marked the hunt.

We are powerful. It is the place of the powerful to protect the weak. To drive out the shades. To make the world safe.

For a time as they cruised through the clouds and headed to the east in silence, as Kagan struggled to put the turmoil within him into words. She could feel all of it, even from a distance she could have felt it all, but she waited. She waited until he was ready to express what he was feeling. “You sound like him.”

Once more the rumble of wrath passed along the length of the dragon. Fire did not truly boil up from deep within a dragon. They sprayed a flammable venom and ignited it with the grinding of their flinty teeth as their jaws parted. When that great rumbling sound came from deep in the guts of a dragon, it was the glands that produced that venom kicking into action, readying it for a fight. *The Inferno seeks only to consume. To swallow all the world in pursuit of his imaginary foe. He cares nothing for the people he conquers. No more than I care for the cattle I devour.*

She dropped into a dive, not to scare Kagan, who could never have less than absolute trust in her no matter their disagreement, but to bring the roaming animals of the farmlands into sight. So she could take her pick of the herd.

Once breath came back to Kagan after the drop, he pressed her. “So aslinda should rule the world instead?”

We are the light in the darkness. The flame that drives out the cold. Let the dirt people fight amongst themselves if they must. We are above it. We are not their stewards; we are the protectors of the world.

The fields stretched out as far as the eye could see. The green pastures framed by hedgerows, the bare fields only now showing sprouts of spring growth and the shining patches where rice was grown. This was not a wild place, where the dead took vengeance upon the living. It was not a place of chaos like the steppes, like the Arazi lands or the lesser kingdoms, where at any moment a shade might tear through and destroy everything and everyone.

Here the dead were tamed, as surely as the grass and the trees. Human hands had shaped them into perfect order. Placed them all into the same square grid as the crops. Trimmed back those that grew too unruly and fostered the growth of those that withered with age.

Kagan did not know why he kept speaking out loud. He knew that Yelena could hear his thoughts clearly, but the habit of centuries was on him now. “You’ve picked the only place in the world that doesn’t need us.”

She swept down towards a field of fat sheep. Anticipation tingling along the length of her body, scales pressing flat to smooth their drop, even as her wings tucked in smoothly against her sides.

We have other ties here. Don’t we.

When Yelena’s claws took the sheep, the impact of her body’s momentum travelled through it, snapping its neck before she’d even tightened her grip, then her wings unfurled once more, the air catching in them suddenly, jerking them back in their sockets and making Kagan’s own shoulders ache in sympathy. He wondered if Orsina felt it too.

“The girl...”

The beating of Yelena’s aching wings drowned out his voice as she hauled herself up against the pull of the earth below. They cleared the fence at the field’s edge, wings beating faster and harder, hauling them up and away from the pasture they’d plundered, skimming past the bright young leaves of a tree planted at a corner where three of the boxes met as a marker.

There was no rumble from Yelena now. She was not angry but hurt. *You raised her. Bonded her. It should have been a choice that we both made. I would not breed without your assent.*

Kagan groaned. “I didn’t... she just happened.”

Yelena’s thoughts grew more pointed. Sharp enough that they stung. *She has happened to me, also.*

“I didn’t. I had no idea that...” He took a breath and let his thoughts settle once more. “I didn’t even think I could bond her, let alone that it would extend to you.”

Yet you did it. And now all three of us are bound. From now until the end.

Kagan closed his eyes and spoke truly. “I’m sorry. It was that or death for us all.”

You have tied my soul to a stranger. A dragon-slayer.

He tightened his grip on her once more, the horned edges of her spinal plates digging into the inside of his thighs. Not because he feared he would be dislodged, but because he did not know the answer to his next question. “Would you have chosen death over our bond?”

Yelena’s heart hammered in turn with his. He could not believe how badly he had missed the beating of her wings, the tiny whips of air that played off their edges and struck him, the ache of exercise in muscles that he himself did not possess. This was the one place in all of creation where he felt whole. The thought that he might have compromised that by bonding with Orsina made him feel sick to his stomach.

I could not be more pleased.

His guts felt like they’d dropped out of him. As though they’d taken another dive instead of the slow ascent that they were undertaking. “What?”

I know you Kagan, better than you know your own heart. You love this girl like a father. If you had not saved her when you had the chance, your soul would have been scarred for all time.

For the first time since they’d taken flight, he was surprised to find a smile had crept upon his face. “We saved each other.”

That power she wields... The weight of Yelena’s excitement struck him like they’d hit the ground. So solid and palpable it stunned him that he’d missed out on it before. It is enough to defeat him. Enough to bring all the walls of every kingdom crashing down. And you made her ours.

“I don’t know about *ours*.” Kagan chuckled. “Tell that girl to go left, she’ll go right to spite you.”

He leaned to the left to take a better look at the city as they slowly turned back towards it, only for Yelena to bank the other way. If a dragon could snicker, then that would have been the noise that she made. *She is more dragon than human. You need only treat her so to get what you desire.*

Jabbing her with his heel in some small scales, he managed to get Yelena to bank back the other way, at least for a moment. Covotana did not look much like a city in preparation for war. There were the horses outside, but the actual armies would not gather until the last moment, so that as much labor might be eked out of each peasant in the fields as could be before it came time for them to risk their lives once more. In truth the only way that it differed from when he first laid eyes upon it was that it was a little uglier now, thanks to the extensive repairs from all the times that it had come under attack. The pristine white city shining in the center of open fields had its dark patches now, where soot was ingrained in stone too high for the servants to clean, or where sections had been replaced with whatever dark rock could be had for ready money. With time, Kagan was sure it would return to its old form and function, but for now, Covotana looked like a beast laid out to lick its wounds. “She’s just a little girl. Not whatever monster these people think she is. Not the devil the Arazi say she is either.”

With a lurch, they were headed straight up, then the serpentine neck curved back further still, and Yelena was looking down into his eyes for the briefest of moments before the rest of her followed into the flip. At the moment that they were both entirely upside down, she let loose her wooly quarry, letting the sheep carcass fly up into the air, and righting herself before it reached the peak of its arc and came tumbling down in front of her face.

With a huff of effort, her venom came. Dousing the dead sheep. Thick, sticky and clinging to wool and skin alike as it fell by.

Then they were dipping into a dive, chasing dinner down to the ground, teeth grinding and sparks gathering around Yelena’s lips. *You cannot lie to me, Kagan. No more than she can. We are of one heart. Whatever you might want her to be, she is what she is.*

Her fire was unleashed, catching the coated sheep and setting it ablaze. Still it fell burning from the sky like a falling star to hit the packed dirt of the road below. Their own descent was slower, a gradual spiral down through the greasy smoke, and delicious aroma of burning fat.

Kagan had the good sense to dismount before Yelena got into her food. He’d been splattered with enough gore in his lifetime to know better than to sit directly behind a dragon’s head while it fed.

Giving her a good bit of distance to protect himself from the abrupt launch of an arterial spray, he circled Yelena. “She’s been through some hard times. She’s been hurt. She can heal. We all heal in time.”

It seemed that his bond-mate was in something of a hurry today. A single bite had cracked open the blackened skull of the sheep, and Yelena’s tongue darted out to taste the sweet prize inside,

but once that was halfway to done, she turned her attention back to the body as a whole. Head weaving from side to side as she dislodged her jaw to swallow it in a single bite. *There's no healing from power. Not once you've tasted it. You know that as well as me.*

Kagan set his feet apart under his shoulders and straightened up to face Yelena. There were few things that he would ever oppose her will about. But Orsina was one. "I'm going to help her get back to herself."

I'm waiting with bated breath for what she will become next. Yelena's head flicked back and the sheep vanished down, to become a slight swell on her neck, moving slowly down as the muscles of her neck worked.

Kagan's frown deepened. "What is that supposed to mean?"

With her hunger sated, Yelena now turned her sooty muzzle towards him. *Why are you pretending that you do not know already? That you do not know what we will become now that we are together. You can feel it as clearly as I. The hole in our hearts.*

"She's bonded to us, that doesn't mean..."

The pressure of Yelena's thoughts knocked him off balance. The weight of her sincerity, the depth of her conviction, it pushed him back a full step before he could regain control of himself. *We were a pair, now we are a three. We are incomplete without her.*

There were things that he had not been willing to admit even to himself about what he had accomplished when he became Orsina's impresario. The one to initiate their connection may have been her, and the circumstances in which they had undertaken it had been one of duress, but that did not matter to the bond. The truth of the matter was that if it had been anyone else in the world, he would have rejected the offer outright, and even with the connection he had already felt with the girl, it likely would have failed if he had been any other Arazi. He was a dragon-rider without his dragon. He had a soul crying for the touch of another that it had long been denied. His own desperation for any sort of connection had left him open to her, vulnerable, so that when she offered to bind their spirits together, he had been unable to resist the offer. So long as he had kept his focus on other things, he had not needed to grant this event its significance. He had been able to push it to the back of his mind during the war with his own people, with his long pilgrimage back home, his focus had once more been locked squarely upon survival, but now that they were all safe, there was no more excuse to turn his gaze from the thing that he had wrought, other than his own fear of it. Still, he tried. "She's just a girl."

You feel her absence as keenly as me. Why are you lying to yourself?

He held up a hand to Yelena, and without further prompting, she nuzzled against it. Her scales still blazed hot around her mouth, like the hearthstone of a fire freshly stifled. The blood upon it had already dried to stickiness. She could feel the turmoil within him. The deliberate ignorance that he had cultivated. She was forcing him to confront it so that he might heal, but that didn't mean it did not hurt to poke at the wound. "Because I don't want this. I didn't want to bond with her. Didn't want to go save her. I didn't want any of this. I just wanted to live a quiet life."

On another dragon, the shudder of scales would have been a rebuke, a sign of disgust, but he knew Yelena too well to misinterpret her motions, and she knew him too well to offer him up a comforting lie. Even though she was wincing in sympathy with his pain. *You are mine. She is yours. I am hers. We are dragon, and human and more. There can be no peace for us. It is not in our nature. We fight, we strive, we rule. We do not hide. We do not cower.*

“Do you know how many years I was alone? Living off the land, doing no harm to anybody and passing unseen?” Kagan knew that she did. That she was reading through his surface emotions and the memories replayed themselves in his mind. He knew that she knew everything that he did, but he still felt the need to say the words. To make his hesitation clear.

I felt your suffering every day I was imprisoned. It rang in harmony with my own. It was how I knew that someday we would be reunited. For no soul could suffer such misery every day without seeking solace.

“I wasn’t miserable. I had everything that I needed.” The words tasted like ashes in his mouth.

Except purpose. Lie to yourself if you must, but do not lie to me Kagan. I know what you felt. I could feel every hollow victory being soured by my absence.

“I missed you, but I did not miss this.” He managed a grim smile. “The fighting, the arguing, the grandiose plans.”

Imagine a world where none had to fear the shades. Where none had to kowtow to the Inferno for protection. Imagine the world that you and I could make, with her.

She lowered a wing to him, to make his climb back up onto her back more easy, at the expense of pressure on the sensitive membranes of her wings. She truly must have been feeling bad for him if she was offering that. “It’s a pretty dream, but that’s all it is.”

Back on her back, with all the life flowing from her body into him and around once more in what should have felt like a complete circuit he should have felt at peace again. But the niggling absence of Orsina from their presence left this old perfection feeling like they were play-acting. With her life, so flowed Yelena’s thoughts. *With her power, it could be real. Our visions of the future can be fulfilled. Everything that we have ever wanted is right there for the taking.*

“Everything you ever wanted.” He laid down flat upon her back as she began to beat her wings. For stability, but for the closeness with her too. To hear the beating of the twin to his heart.

Do you still regret? Yelena’s sorrow washed through him. But it was not what he had expected. It was not misery at all they had suffered, or guilt at the course she had led them on. It was pity for him. For his lack of perspective. Without a second mind for his thoughts to echo back from, it was as though he had not been hearing them at all. After all this time, haven’t you realised that we were in the right? That they would not have had to send you away and bury me beneath a mountain if they had not feared our words?

“I don’t care anymore. Right, wrong, they’re just excuses we make to do what we want to do.” Kagan forced himself back up to sitting as they drifted higher and higher by the strength of her

wings alone. “You want to rule. So you say a world where you rule is the right one. Me, I just want to live. I want her to live.”

There was no way around her. No way to speak to her that she had not already foreseen and set aside. She had the key to his heart and his mind, and no shame in rummaging through the both of them to find exactly the words she needed him to hear so that he would follow the course she’d laid out for them. Same as it ever was. *Then you’ll aid me in making her strong enough to survive.*

“You saw what she did.” The memory of Orsina’s power sent a shiver running through Kagan. He may have been a dragon-slayer now, but it had been a choice of monumental consequence to him. A taboo that he had almost died rather than breaking. And when Orsina had stood and called on her shades, it had made a mockery of that indecision. She had not been indecisive; she had not batted an eye as she cut dragons down from the sky as casually as a lesser woman might have swatted away flies. “You think she needs anything from us?”

She needs our life to feed her power.

They were high enough now for forward motion to resume. They began to drift all too slowly back towards the city and the tangle of mixed emotions tickling at the periphery of Kagan’s senses. It was only here, in flight, far from the ears of spies and Orsina herself that Kagan dared to speak the truth of their situation. “She’s got it. There’s no locking her out now. What she wants, she can take.”

Yelena stopped the beating of her wings for just long enough for gravity to turn Kagan’s stomach again. Another expression of irritation. Yelena wouldn’t want to produce more venom now, not when it would sit in her neck-sacks like a sloshing weight. *How can an empath be so oblivious to the feelings of others? She is taking from us, this creates obligation, guilt. Even though it costs us nothing, she will feel this. It is a potent lever to control her.*

“What if I don’t want to control her?” Kagan chose his next words with care, because the both of them knew it was the crux of his whole argument about their situation. “What if I want to set her free?”

Then you’re blind, or a fool. Perhaps both. Either we find a use for her, or others will. Wouldn’t you rather see her spend her life building a utopia than advancing the position of a petty king in some border kingdom?

His own anger flared at the thought of Orsina trapped in either version of the future that Yelena had just outlined. If he had the choice, he’d take her far away from all of this. “She’s not some wyvern to latch your wagon on the back of. She’s a person with her own hopes and dreams, same as you and me.”

And being a person; that set us free from our obligations, didn’t it. Being a person meant that we were never punished for straying from the path others demanded of us. After all that I have suffered, don’t preach to me about the freedom people are due.

Yelena was strangely still beneath him as the memories of her imprisonment washed through them both. The endless darkness. The endless silence. The nothingness. The weight of a mountain between them and the sky. Everything that aslinda feared most, she had endured, and come out the other side unbroken. She had not been changed by her pain, she had been forged into something truer to what she was always meant to be.

The only freedom anyone will ever have is strength. Enough strength to throw off the yoke of whoever is trying to control them. We are the ones who are making her strong. We need to reap the benefits of that while we can.

Strength would set them free. That was always the way that the Arazi thought. Kagan could not be sure whether that idea had come to them from the dragons or the humans, but either way, it had driven them to some of their worst excesses. If others were meant to determine their own fate, then they should have made themselves strong. As though some itinerant goatherd was born as capable as a dragon of inflicting wanton destruction. For Konus and his cult, it had become a rallying call. Proof that their actions were according to some greater plan, some divine mandate for their endless cycle of expansion and conquest. If they were not meant to rule over all, then why did nobody stop them.

Kagan's words came soft, but there was no fear of Yelena missing a single word. "I will not let you use her."

Yelena fell back into her usual rhythm as they passed over the city walls, angling out to take a long spiral around the city before they went back to the palace to roost. He hadn't realized it before, but Yelena was doing it on purpose. Letting herself be seen by all and sundry. Reminding them of her presence in the city. She did not need to go out and feast every day any more than he would have needed to stomp his way through the city streets to whichever inn was the fullest. She was choosing to be seen. To evoke their fear. To remind them that they lived only because she allowed it.

We are three in one, Kagan. She cannot reject me any more than your arm can reject your leg. My thoughts are her thoughts. Just as yours as mine, and mine yours. You know I cannot bring her to harm.

Yelena had always been good at this, thinking in circles around him, placating when he set his feet to hold his ground, undermining him with compassion. Using the trust they shared like a bludgeon to get her way. He'd missed this so much. His heart ached, and even as he recognized what she was doing he knew that he could not resist. But for Orsina, he would still try. "Ambition can be a poison."

They swept low over the rooftops where solid terracotta tiles that defined so much of the city gave away to a patchwork of thatch-work. It was where the poor lived, crammed atop one another with abandon, dozens sharing a bed, stretching one man's food to feed a family. There was no fear radiating up from these houses, only the same desperation that marked every moment of their lives. It was almost a relief by comparison. It felt more honest, like the minds of animals at hunt. All of their focus drawn in to a single point instead of the chaos that the rest of the city reverberated with.

Yelena paused in flight above the worst part of the city, wings beating as she looked down at the poor and downtrodden. The ones that the Arazi would have said were suffering for their own weakness. *Poison is a medicine in the wrong dosage.*

The city was a warren hard to decipher from above, and impossible for Kagan to understand on the ground. There seemed to be no reason to the way that it was laid out until he had realised that it was not a single city but dozens upon dozens, built and rebuilt centuries apart. Layered and blended. A tapestry of the many lives that had been lived here. A tapestry stitched without any thought about what had come before or what would come next.

“Your plans for great change have hurt us before.” It was a low blow, to put the blame on her for what had befallen them when he had gone right along with her rebellion happily until it was crushed.

Her wings blurred at either side of him. There were thermals here that she could have been riding to regain the height they needed to reach their eyrie atop the palace, but she was choosing not to. She was choosing to vent her frustrations through the violent thumping of her wings. Another growl rumbled up through his legs that had nothing to do with venom, and everything to do with aggravation. *Your willingness to pass through the world without leaving a mark has hurt us so much more. You have lived as a peasant when you were born to be king. You have banked your flame so low that it cannot be seen.*

They hung in the sky above the palace, and everywhere that his senses turned, Kagan could feel the eyes upon him. He felt the flares of emotion rising up as the dragon was seen, as its meaning was recognized. Terror. Awe. Hatred. Anger. All the things that a dragon should inspire. “No danger of going unseen now.”

You are back where you belong. Yelena’s wingbeats slowed and they sank back down onto the ruins of the rose-garden atop the palace. She touched down so softly that Kagan did not even feel it. *We are where we belong.*

“Now all that you need to do is convince the girl that she is meant to be here with us.”

She spread her wings wide open and let the world see her one last time before she settled. Spraying out a swift arc of venom into the air and sparking it alight. The emotions of the city were deafening. But even over the top of it, he could hear her surety and sincerity. *Who could resist this?*

4 - The Price of Peace

Gemmazione, Regola Dei Volpe 1

The clash of steel-on-steel stirred Harmony from her slumber. Once more, she had come to bed alone, with Orsina's attentions turned to her endless studies. Her dreams had been troubled since the battle of Selvaggia, made only more violent since she had fought through the Arazi to rescue Orsina. She attributed those sounds to a dream at first. To the nightmarish blur of the wars she waged night on night with unceasing and unstoppable foes.

So when her eyes opened to the darkness of her chamber and she heard the scraping of metal a second time, it was as though those nightmares were following her back to the waking world. She scrambled a hand in the sheets, looking for the sword that had lain beside her every night as they crossed the Steppes, but it was not there. She was home, in the center of the most fortified palace in the north. A place where swords need not stay close to hand, where there were soldiers and guards and walls and a dragon all standing guard over her each night to ensure that she never had to go from fully asleep to fully awake in an instant and spring from her bed.

Habits were hard to break, and the kind that kept you alive were harder still. For all that a blade did not lie by her hand as she rested, her sword belt still hung on a hook by the bed, and it was swung about her nightgown and fastened before she reached the door.

A glance at the library as she passed assured Harmony that Orsina was safe and well behind the thick oak and the rime of frost coating it. For the first time since stirring her steps lost their assurance as she tried to decide whether it was better to leave her in place, where she would be safe, or call upon her aid. A brief moment sparked up from her memory unbidden. Orsina on dragon-back, arms upraised and the Arazi falling from the sky all around them. The blissful smile on her face.

Better not to bring her along. They didn't need the whole palace torn down around them.

From her own suite of rooms, it was simple enough to simply follow the noise back to its source. She didn't even need to tread lightly, given the cacophony that was going on. Along a few corridors, down a flight of stairs and she rounded a corner directly into the mass of the fighting. She drew her sword to support the palace guard only to realise a step later that they were clashing not with some Agrantine assassin or Arazi invader, but with other guardsmen, wearing barely different colors. She could not parse what was happening until she spotted the huddled group at the center of their mass. Clothed still in night-robos, the same as her, dragged from their beds by unexpected violence, the same as her. A man, woman and two children, huddled together, trusting in the strength of their men at arms to protect them.

It was quite apparent that they weren't going to be sufficient. They lacked the numbers to hold off the palace guard, and they lacked any route of egress even if they were successful in defeating this group. Harmony shouted over the clatter. "What is the meaning of this?"

If she had hoped that the voice of a princess would carry more weight, she was soon disappointed. One of the palace guards outside the press turned to face her, bared weapon

already up and swinging before he realized who he was attacking. At which point there was an abrupt halt to his motion, presumably as his life flashed before his eyes. “You should not be here, princess. Know that this is by your brother’s order, and do not worry yourself with it.”

She could not keep the obvious contempt from her face. “My brother ordered you to pull children from their beds and attack them?”

The unfortunate guard squared his shoulders. As though puffing himself up would make her back down. “The King ordered that these traitors be arrested.”

A shrill cry cut through the melee. The woman had a baby at her hip, perhaps old enough to stand and walk on its own, but so dazed by the turn of events that it was being carried. “Exactly what treachery did that swaddled babe commit?”

Beneath his helm, the guard’s lips formed a thin line. “I have my orders, straight from the king.”

One of the traitor’s guardsmen fell with a scream of his own. A halberd from the second rank knocking aside the brawlers as they pressed shield to shield and hammering down into his shoulder. The mother and baby were sprayed with his blood as he flopped on the flagstones.

“Enough of this! Everyone hold.” She shouldered past the guard, and he made no attempt to restrain her. Probably judging that he was less liable to be held responsible for her wading into a maelstrom of hacking swords than laying hands on her personally. “Put up your arms. All of you!”

The palace guards were relatively obedient, to her pleasant surprise. They probably hoped that she was there to relieve them of this dishonorable duty. Close enough to the nobles now, she recognized them. Lord and Lady Rana. Minor nobility held in sway to their neighbors, the Cavallas. The mother found courage now that Harmony was there to call out. “What is happening? We were stirred from our rest by an assault on our chambers!”

Harmony still had no idea what was happening, or where these bizarre accusations of treachery from within their own palace might have sprung forth, but she felt certain that either Art knew, or he would know the very person to lambast for overreaching like this.

Pressing through the massed guards, she put herself between the front line of men at arms and palace guards. The Rana men had been on the worse side of the conflict, several were bleeding, others had their shields in splinters, dangling from broken arms. They’d fought valiantly to defend the family that employed them. They did not deserve to be harmed over some politicking nonsense.

She spoke loudly and clearly, so that those behind her were as certain of her words as those in front. “These men mean you no harm, please put down your arms and allow them to take you into their custody without further bloodshed. I will go to my brother immediately and set this right.”

Lord Rana may have been dishevelled and dragged from bed in the middle of the night, but he was the very picture of wounded nobility when he pushed his children behind him and cried out, “You expect us to believe that?”

“I can make you no promise, except that I will go directly to my brother on your behalf. I can see no reason for this chaos, and I know his heart.”

“Perhaps not so well as you think, miss.” The guard at her heel was holding a writ, a red wax seal still looking warm on it, with a Volpe signet ring having been pressed into it. She snatched the paper from his hands and scanned through. Everything was as it should be. There was no room for misinterpretation or suggestion of forgery.

For a long moment she just stood there, staring at the writ. Trying to parse any reason for it. Some secret that Artemio was holding close to his chest that might explain why he would issue such a command, but she could not. He had been distant since his ascension, surrounded at all times by servants and sycophants. She was not in his confidence as she once had been and that hurt her heart, though not as much as the lurking worry that he might have changed so much without her even managing to notice.

She forced her expression to remain calm. “Guards, return to your stations. Lord Rana, please escort your family back to their suite and remain there so that the guards stationed outside your doors have no cause to quarrel with you again.”

The guard who took the proffered writ back from her did not shame her by speaking out loudly, but when they stood close, he still told her plainly. “You can’t overrule the word of the king.”

“The king is not here and I am. Do you suppose that he would thank you for killing me?”

The guard took a full step back. “Killing you?”

“That’s what it would take, to make me stand down and let you abduct the nobility of Espher in the night. You must know that I have no issue with killing you, sir. That at this point in the evening’s festivities, it would in fact be a welcome relief.” Her hand was resting on the hilt of her sword now, and every one of the gathered guards had turned their attention to it. All but the one still clinging to his writ who was aghast. She couldn’t help but feel some sympathy for the man, thrust into the middle of a situation like this. “You... you are not disobeying your king’s orders. You are merely delaying acting upon them until they can be properly clarified. There is no other escape from the Rana chambers, I suppose?”

“We’ve guards on the servant’s passages.”

She spoke softer then. “Then there is no harm that can be done here. Is there?”

There was a flush of shame to his expression as he stepped back a little further to make way for her. “An hour. I can give you that, Princess.”

She nodded in thanks as she passed him by. “More than enough time to get this all straightened out.”

To gain entry to the bed chamber of a king would have been no simple task for anyone else in the palace. The Cerva had been intense about their privacy, and it seemed that Art had made no change to the protections that they’d layered in place. Their suite was a fortress within the palace, which was a fortress within the city, which was in turn a fortress of sorts. Palace guards

stood watch over the doors to the suite. There were Shadebound lounging in the outermost chamber and before the doors to his bedroom itself, there were a pair of familiar looking lords who it took Harmony a moment in the dim light to recognize as sons of Duchess Granchio.

While the others had been simple enough to cow into submission, the Granchio sons proved to have been made of sterner stuff. They outright refused her entry. “The king’s rest is not to be disturbed.”

“If the king did not want his rest disturbed then he should have not issued commands that make no sense to be enacted during his rest. If you won’t let me in, then get him out here. Now.”

With precisely the same clipped tone, the other one replied. “The king’s rest is not to be...”

The smile on Harmony’s face was not forced, but it was in no small way manic. “That’s fine. I understand, you have your orders. I’m just going to stoke up the fire while I sit out here and wait for him to wake naturally.”

The brothers looked to one another, but neither seemed to have any objection. The chamber certainly wasn’t cold, but then they weren’t in their nightgown. She stalked over to the low table by the fire, picked up the oldest leatherbound tome that was in reach, and tossed it into the flames.

At once the uproar she’d been expecting appeared. Both brothers yelling and dashing forward, though only one had the courage to thrust his hand into the flames and grab for the book. He cried out in pain as the flames licked up his arm, but nonetheless he managed to retrieve it before too much damage was done. The edges of the pages would be forever ashen and the title would likely be beyond understanding until it was rebound, but her goal had been accomplished as she set a finger to her lips and shushed them. “The king’s rest is not to be disturbed.”

It seemed that no matter how plush the furnishings, some sound did make its way through into Artemio’s quarters. He emerged, looking half-dead as he always did when roused, to discover the two noblemen he had placed at his door to guard him in the night playing a game of chase-me with his sister, who stopped dead and grinned the moment that he came into sight. “So nice of you to join us, your grace.”

Still half asleep, he nodded to her politely. “Harmony.”

She gave a bobbing curtsy that would have made her mother proud in turn. “Artemio.”

The night-guards looked entirely lost, so Artemio did them the courtesy of dismissing them with a wave. Then he made his way to the chaise lounge by the fire and slumped down. Ignoring the sooty stains and smoldering tome on the hearth. “I suppose that you have some good reason for visiting me at...” He glanced at the candles on his fireplace, “Three in the morning.”

“Well you know me, Art, I just can’t sleep when there are guards pulling people from their beds in the dead of night. Something about the screaming and fighting. And when I can’t sleep, well I tend to wander, and make it everyone’s problem.”

He pinched his nose for a moment, as if trying to stop the spread of a headache, then finally he asked, “The Rana are quartered near to you?”

“Are there so many innocent people being dragged from their beds that you can’t keep track of them all.” She was surprised to find herself looming over him, having crossed the room in her fury before the words had worked their way out of her.

“Innocent.” He met her glower with a steady stare. It was like looking down into a deep pool with no bottom. Only yourself reflected back. “That’s a very weighted word. Lord Rana’s estates flourish despite him being little more than a vassal to the Cavallas. Not in terms of agriculture, but in terms of wealth. I should like to know who is providing him with a pension, that he might live in the lap of such luxury.”

She almost laid hands on him then, reaching for the collar of his bed-robe before catching herself and forcing her hands down to her sides. “For the love of... Art, you can’t arrest people just for having money.”

“I’m told that I’m the king now, and I might arrest people for whatever reason I fancy but consider how the Rana have always voted in favor of Agrantine interests before you leap to branding them innocent.”

She forced herself to sit, to settle on the edge of the table heaped with books, knocking some down to the ground but paying them no mind. “Art, you’ve said it yourself that half the court have had their pockets lined by the Agrantine at one point or another.”

He sighed at the toppled tomes but made no move to right them. “True enough, and this shall provide an ample message to every one of them.”

“Oh so we’re making an example of them.” Harmony’s voice hardened. “Treating people like pieces in a game?”

“Some of the greater families who have taken from Agrant I cannot afford to lose. All are traitors to the crown, in one way or another, but I have inherited a box of broken tools that I must use to fashion together a future that will last.” He had begun to come back alive as they spoke, but now he sounded more exhausted than ever. “If the cost of keeping all the other traitors in line is the head of one of their co-conspirators, then I see it as a bargain at the price.”

But for Harmony, this was not some abstract idea. It was tears streaming down the cheeks of children, parents clinging to each other in fear in the dark of night. Guards bleeding and dying to protect their family. “And what about his wife, his children?”

“She’s complicit. They shall be fostered by a more trustworthy family.”

That stopped Harmony in her tracks once more. “Complicit?”

“Either of the two might have been broker of their deal. I cannot take the head of one and not the other, so both.”

Harmony found herself curling up, resting her forehead on her hands, her elbows on her knees. She did not know that she could stand to look at Artemio in that moment. She didn’t know if

she'd be able to hold back the comparisons to their father. "Is this the kind of king you're going to be? Spilling blood whenever it best suits your purposes?"

"I am a student of history, Harmony. That is all that I have ever been. Look to the kings of old and ask yourself if they lost sleep over the massacre done in their name." There were few things in life that could make Artemio Volpe sound like a lovestruck poet, but the subject of his great kingdom that he loved ever so much came the closest. "Ask Espher if she regrets the blood her soil has drunk to keep her safe."

She couldn't appeal to his morals, because he was willing to set them aside when it came to his precious Espher, but he was still a man, and that meant that he still had an ego. "Is this how you want to be remembered?"

"All I want is for there to still be people can remember." He slumped back on the seat, resisting the urge to slump down an nap, but not by much. "When the wars are done, we can turn our attention to a beautiful legacy, but for now survival must come first. At any cost."

She reached out and caught his hands in hers. "But... not like this Art. Surely there's a better way. Snatching children from their beds in the dead of night..."

He let her hold onto his hands, he did not draw away, but neither did he give any sign in his face or bearing that he was understanding anything that she was telling him. "Every night that a traitor lays down their head and tries to settle to sleep, they shall not dream of my defeat, because they will be too troubled by the thought that at any moment a knock may come on their chamber door. Did you think that I had chosen this course lightly? Espher is in disarray, and I must bring the entirety of court to heel if I mean to save her."

She released his hands, and caught his face, stubble rubbing over her fingertips as she tilted his gaze up to meet her own. "Even if people call you a tyrant?"

A twitch of his lip was all that he showed. The beginnings of a sneer. "When have I ever cared for the opinion of my lessers?"

The next words came softly. So soft she couldn't even call them a whisper. If he had not been him, she doubted that they would have even been heard. "Even if I call you a tyrant?"

"Harmony... you are my sister. You shall always hold a special place in my esteem, but you have a soft heart, and I cannot afford to show weakness right now. Not even to those in my own camp. I cannot have you arguing with me in public. Here, in private, by all means, voice your concerns, but out there we must present a united front."

Her hands fell back to her lap. She couldn't keep herself from biting back at that. "So I should just sit down and shut up, like father always said?"

"You should trust in my judgement." It was him reaching out to her now, her resisting the urge to pull away from him. "Have I ever steered us wrong?"

“You steered yourself onto the throne, without ever getting your hands dirty or your reputation sullied by the suggestion you might actually want it. Poor Art, just doing the duty that’s been handed to him.”

He released his grip on her clasped hands, staring down at his own as though he could not bear to meet her eyes. “I can assure you; my hands are... not clean.”

“Oh I know that.” She leaned away from him now. “So how long is it going to be until I get a knock on my chamber doors in the middle of the night to make sure I never tell it to anyone?”

“Harmony...”

She scoffed at his half-hearted attempt to distract her from the truth before the words even came. “Oh you’d never do me any harm, right? Unless it was convenient. Unless it was for Espher.”

He continued looking down at his feet. “Everything that is great about this land is embodied in you, so how could preserving her and you ever be at counter-odds to one another?”

“When I disagree about having people executed for no reason other than to make a point.”

He sat up straight as a bolt. “You’re right. Of course you’re right. I shall have every other traitor hauled out of their beds to be executed too. Everyone that has ever taken Agrantine coin. Everyone that has ever been against me. Then I shall sit here in an empty kingdom, listening to the wind whistling through and waiting for the Agrantine armies to come marching in.”

It was difficult to remain angry with him when this played out so like so many of their childhood arguments. “Don’t be facetious. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Dear sister, you’ve just dragged me from bed at three in the morning.” He chuckled drily. “The fact that I’m even speaking in words that can be understood is a small miracle.”

It was the chuckle that did the trick. If he’d gone on being stuffy and royal and distant, then she’d probably have ended up smacking the smug expression of his face, but he was still Art. No matter what crowns were put on his head, or what roles were forced on him. He was still her brother.

“Alright. I’m not going to fight you on this. I’m not going to interfere. But I do need for you to keep me informed. You have me running errands for you all day, I barely have a chance to see you. I need to know when things like this are going to happen, or of course I will react out of surprise to them.”

He opened and closed his mouth, before conceding the point entirely. “That seems exceptionally reasonable. I shall have my staff schedule suppers for us to share, unless some other event precludes it.”

She gave a gracious nod in return. Just the right side of playful. “Thank you.”

There was a smirk playing over his lips. “Any other demands?”

“I need you to take the Arazi threat seriously.”

That seemed to take the smile right out of him again. “Harm, there is only so much I can do in any given day. Preparing for war against one unbeatable enemy is much like preparing for war against another, wouldn’t you say?”

“I don’t know, would you say that fighting an army of dragons was the same as fighting an army of men?” She sniped back.

“We have watchtowers raised to give us warning should anything bigger than a crow fly south of the steppes.”

There was a momentary lull, then Harmony got to the point. “Why aren’t you worried about fighting them?”

“Because of your little sweetheart, dear sister.” Harmony blushed, but she didn’t contradict him. “And I do dearly hope that you are keeping her sweet. She demolished the Arazi in our last conflict, and she has only grown in strength since then.”

She couldn’t believe the nonsense she was hearing. “You think Orsina can defeat the entire Arazi army?”

He shrugged a shoulder, trying to right his nightrobe as it slunk off. “I think she can even the playing field sufficiently that they present markedly less of a threat than the endless legions of the south, certainly.”

If he wasn’t willing to see reason, she did not know how she could force him to. “They have dragons, Art.”

“And what is a dragon but a particularly clever lizard?”

She snorted. Then covered up her mouth, mortified as usual. “I’d love to see you describe Yelena that way to her face.”

“Just as soon as I can find where the Cerva hid their fireproof robes.”

They both chuckled, but then the silence came back. It was not the comfortable silence of their past long nights with only the other for company. It was different now, with sharp edges. Artemio was the first to break it. “I am sorry, that I haven’t been giving you the attention you require. I’ve been... the actual running of the kingdom is a massive undertaking in itself, before you account for the wars, and the backstabbing nobility and... I have taken your confidence for granted, and it was disrespectful. I apologize.”

Harmony feigned a gasp of amazement. “Now that I’ve heard the king apologize, I will most certainly be murdered in the dead of night.”

“Just keep it to yourself, and the executioner can have the morning off.” He chuckled.

Then the sobering truth crept back into the room. The executioner would not have the morning off. Two heads would be taken, and Harmony, who had rushed off to champion the people who were facing death, had instead become complicit in it herself. As surely as if she’d signed the writ in her own hand. What Art did reflected on her just as surely as what she did reflected on

him. He might have allowed her the outlet of actually confronting him about his bad decisions now, but all that did was share the burden of blame across both their shoulders when she couldn't convince him to reverse course. Given that she couldn't recall ever having won an argument with him, this was liable to be increasingly uncomfortable for her.

“Good night, Harmony. I'm going to see if I might snatch another hour or two in bed before the servants try to squeeze me into whichever hideous monstrosity the Cerva considered to be fashionable.”

She tried to hide her relief that they were parting ways with a chuckle. “Good night, Art.”