

**A Legacy of Failure**  
***Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

Noon had passed by without notice and Artemio was eating into his afternoon classes before he'd even made it out of the first heap of notes. Albano Granchio was the first inquisitor to die, the seventh victim listed chronologically in the rather haphazard timeline that Artemio was sketching out. Albano was the third son of that family, talentless and slow-witted as far as his notation indicated, a political appointee to secure that family's loyalty.

Albano's notetaking left much to be desired, and from the many different handwritings on display it was apparent that he cycled through scribes at the same rate other men changed their shirts. While his timeline of events marked him as the seventh victim by its abrupt termination, a glance at dates and details of decomposition suggested that he was actually either the ninth or tenth. Since there was no way to know for certain, Artemio composed his list based on discovery of the bodies rather than the specific dates of the murders. There simply wasn't enough information to do otherwise.

Quirino Cigno assumed the investigation after the Granchio lad proved his incompetence in a rather spectacular fashion, spraying blood all across the patios of his father's townhouse. It was Quirino's blood that stained this very chamber, and his diaries that provided Artemio with the wealth of useful knowledge.

While Albano made a note when it was absolutely necessary, and not a moment beforehand, Quirino struck the other extreme. Margin notes proliferated until they were consuming the main text. Which votes were being discussed in the Teatro on the date of the murder, which way the dead men meant to place their vote, what they had been wearing the last time that they were seen, friendships that they had recently formed. It seemed that while Albano had repeatedly banged his head against the problem of how the murders were being committed, Quirino had skipped forward to consider why.

As a creature of the court his natural assumption was that the killings were courtly business, diplomacy taken to its sharpest end, and as such his investigation reflected this. He had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the various alliances, factions, friendships, marriages and snubs that he was trying to factor into the killings. Yet for all his efforts, there seemed to be no pattern. No one agenda was being pushed by those who died, nor did their death seem to advance any faction that Quirino knew of. Which suggested either some conspiracy with an as yet unpredictable agenda, or some other motive to the murders.

He'd asked the Kings who benefitted from these murders, and from their seat within the carefully constructed cocoon of courtly politics designed to hold them at arm's length from the world they could think of nobody at all. Yet the truth was that these killings were sowing fear among people who had never experienced it in their lives. Even without accounting for the great houses currently rudderless thanks to the death of their patriarch; fear led to chaos.

Any enemy of Espher would benefit when the ruling class were in flux, but so too would any domestic group with an axe to grind. The only thing that kept Artemio convinced that this was the work of some foreign power was the methods of the murders.

While Albano had politely declined to include the gruesome details in his notation, rendering them nigh on useless, Quirino had provided detailed descriptions of the state that the bodies were discovered in. Dismembered was one of the first words to jump out at Artemio. Eviscerated was another. He had to stop and push all thoughts of Mother aside before he could continue. It was bad enough when he was picturing a blade in the dark and a cut throat but the way that these victims had been destroyed was brutal. If he had not taken Quirino at his word regarding blade marks, he would have assumed that the injuries described were the work of some wild animal that had been set upon the victims. It was enough to turn his stomach, even before Mother came into the equation.

Whatever other complaints that Artemio might have had about the people of Espher, they were not savages. Many of his complaints through the years were that the people of Espher were quite the opposite, too civilised and genteel to survive in the real world where empires rose and fell like pounding waves on the beaches of history. He honestly didn't believe that any of the preening peacocks of the court or Teatro had the stomach for this kind of violence. Which left only the enemies of Espher to contend with.

Inevitably, as he tapped at the glass side of Daria's cage, his mind turned to the Agrantine Empire.

Living in the border provinces, they were the threat that haunted every waking hour. The once royal house of Volpe was permitted to retain a standing army, encouraged to even, yet for some reason the promise of land in the breadbasket of Espher was insufficiently tempting to appeal to any of the young cavaliers on the rise. They would not tarnish their reputation by allying themselves with the Volpe's and as such, a large proportion of the wealth that the fertile land provided to Father was spent hiring mercenaries to guard the border, where the once great Tagliare had now slowed to a much-forded trickle. These mercenaries brought their reputation into further disrepute, perpetuating the cycle that necessitated them to begin with.

It was not that Agrant had made any overtures to war. There was no massing of troops upon their borders or rumours of marshalling forces elsewhere, but their relationship with Espher had always been complex. Artemio was willing to admit to himself that Father's view on the Agrantine would always be coloured by their own family's history with them.

Though the truth would never truly out, Father remained convinced that the Agrantine had supported the Cerva coup, in an advisory capacity if not in a material manner. It did not take a wise man to recognise that the relationship between the two countries had warmed considerably since the change in leadership.

They had been far from the brink of war prior to the end of the Volpe reign, but there could be no denying that their southern neighbours received no kindness or concession.

Now trade boomed. Father had to grit his teeth and watch as the Agrantine's dour caravans crossed his land. Scowling out at whitewashed wagons and soberly-clothed merchants and muttering that it was unnatural for any man who made his fortune through trade to dress without a hint of pride or flair.

If the Cerva were puppets of Agrant, then these assassinations may have been from some other kingdom attempting to destabilise their grip. If the Cerva were puppets of Agrant, then the assassinations may have been Agrantine attempting to weaken the will of the landed gentry and render them more pliable to commands from on high.

More information was required, and Artemio was not liable to find it within these sheaves of paper. More pressingly, his last lesson of the day was with Prima Cicogna, and while the others might have forgiven him an absence in light of his summons to the palace, she most assuredly would not.

Snatching up the rat, he left the room with all due haste, pausing for only a moment at the door. At the price of another minute of his life, Artemio called on Bisnonno Fiore to spy out along the corridor for him.

When the shade rode him, he suffered a doubling of his vision. He saw the corridor outside, empty and silent as it was now. What he needed to know. Cast over the top of it came a vision of the past. Fiore Volpe had walked these halls many times, surrounded by the crowd of courtiers and servants that were any king's due. A living storm of swishing silk and delicate furs that followed him everywhere that he went. There was music in the halls. Chatter and song. Sunlight streamed in through the windows that were now shuttered. Shades always remembered their lives as brighter than the present, it was part of their nature. Yet there was no denying that this remembered version of the castle was undeniably more appealing.

To be insidious was also in a shade's nature. When Artemio allowed one into his mind, it was not always possible afterwards to decipher which memories were his own and which had been introduced to him by his discourteous guest. Was the palace better under the Volpe rule or was this only how Fiore wanted to see it? The worst part was that even the shade itself may not have known the truth of the matter. Emotion coloured memories, as did ambitions, passions, prejudice and simple failure to recall. A beautiful maiden could become a hideous hag in the recollection of one who loathed her. A proud and noble king could become a hunchbacked child-murderer in the memory of his enemies.

It was an unsettling thing to be unsure if a thought was your own, but it was the price that those who dallied with shades paid for their power. They walked the blade's edge each time that they allowed a shade inside them, not only for the fear that it might break free of control and drink away their life, but also because to be ridden by a shade was to be changed.

Walking in the silent footsteps of his ancestor, Artemio made his way out of the palace, through passages where royal children had once played and even the servants had forgotten. There was no way to sneak from the palace unseen. But by now the crowds of courtiers and their attendants were a heaving, perfumed mass. With a downward glance, it was a simple thing to pass unseen amongst them. He had their look and their mannerisms, even if he'd never lived among them.

Some would call it good breeding. Artemio would not.

With no care for the nature of his driver, he found it to be a simple thing to flag down a mongrel with a hedgehog's spines poking through his hood, and from there onward to his final lesson of the day.

It was considered extremely uncouth to run within the House of Seven Shadows, but the grounds were fair game for some brisk walking. The whole day had gotten away from Artemio. Mother always complained at the way that he lost himself in his books to the exclusion of everything going on around him, and here he was proving her right.

This late in the day, there were other students milling about, lounging on the marble benches by the ponds, conducting illicit romances in plain sight or simply politicking in this miniaturised version of their

social strata. Artemio powered past them all without a backwards glance. He already had a reputation here for his rudeness, such a thing would barely be noticed by the self-involved scions of the highest houses in the land.

Almost every building in the city was pasted with the same white stucco in emulation of the palace's stonework. The House of Seven Shadows had the actual stone throughout most of its structure. The exception, and Artemio's destination, were the lecture halls where wood dominated instead.

Every floorboard creaked beneath Artemio's feet as he was forced to walk the length of the hall and assume his seat. Every eye was turned his way except for those of the Prima. She pointedly did not look at him. Clearing her throat after the discordant creaking had stopped and then launching into her speech anew.

"As the most advanced students within this institution, your eyes must now turn towards the future beyond our walls. Less than a year from this very day, you shall form an unbreakable bond with your choice of impresario. Their life shall flow through you as freely as your own, and it is vital that each of you remember that it is no less precious than your own. I do not mean of course, that your lives are of equal value, rather that what you take from them is still a depletion of your own available resources. If your impresario loses their life, you shall expire with them, so it is a common practice to drink a sip from each glass rather than drink more deeply from one or the other."

There had never been any doubt that Artemio and Harmony were to be paired. It was a matter of longstanding tradition when there were twins. From the moment that Artemio had shown the talent, both of them set to preparing themselves for that coming day. Their whole lives, shaped for that single fact.

"It shall feel strange in the beginning to draw upon the reserves of another. You will have to break the habit of a lifetime of solitude. You shall remain here within Septombra until we are assured that the correct balance has been achieved."

Coming here and listening to the Prima speak was necessary to avoid any undue attention, but it was also an act of cowardice. Artemio had no idea how Harmony had spent her day, where she had gone after they parted in the morning or even if she was still within the grounds of the House, but he should have sought her out immediately. He could justify his work in the palace, but not sitting and hearing the same things he had learned from books as a child repeated as if they were some great wisdom. His attention wavered as Prima Cicogna rambled on, "... great advantages are to be found in this fresh-filled font beyond the extension of our own lifespan. With more cache to spend, we find ourselves in the enviable position of being able to squander a little in the pursuit of education. For instance..."

Two shadows leapt out behind her for an instant before the candelabra snuffed out. The windows lining the hall shuddered. Papers ruffled as the wind tore through the halls.

Artemio was lifted from his bench by an impact from below and flung into the aisle. Compared to what a bound shade could really do, it was a love-tap.

There was widespread tittering among the other students. All too happy to see someone else drawing the Prima's polite wrath.

Artemio made a show of getting up off the floor and rubbing his backside. "My apologies Prima, it seems that in my lateness I accidentally sat in the place of the whipping boy."

Cicogna rolled her eyes at his indignance. "I suppose that you have some reason for your tardiness? Something in your private affairs that is infinitely more important than the uninterrupted education of yourself and your fellows?"

For the second time in the day, his mouth ran away from him. Speaking the truth when it had no right to. "My mother died."

The tittering stopped. The Cicogna's grim disciplinarian smile faded. "That is a great shame, my dear. The Contessa was admired by many."

A long silence lingered over the hall until finally he asked. "Might I be excused?"

It would have been quite impossible for her to refuse after making such a faux-pas. "Of course."

Artemio left the lecture with an even greater sense of urgency than he had arrived. Once he was certain that he could not be heard, he broke into a jog.

If he had kept his mouth shut, the rumour mill would have had nothing at all to feed upon. If he'd kept his mouth shut, he wouldn't have to race the story of his mother's death back to Harmony. Even now he had no idea what to tell her, but given the alternative of her learning through the network of whisperers that she seemed so attuned to, he had no option but to speak directly as swiftly as possible.

Starting with the suite of rooms that had been turned over to her on arrival in the House, Artemio began his hunt. It was not safe to turn his shade loose here as he had Bisnonno in the palace, there were too many others at large and the six for which the place was named were all too willing to prey on their weaker kin.

Yet there was still much that these lingering spectres had to offer when it came to information. They were beneath notice to the students when they were seeking partnership, but only a fool would overlook them entirely.

The open air gymnasium was built back towards the rear of the gardens, as far from the general populace of the city as possible. It was not that the clatter of blades would disturb them, but rather that when their blood was heated, some of the younger students would lose their composure. Losing control of a bound shade could be dangerous.

For now at least, there were no ghosts there that Artemio did not bring with him. Just his sister, moving through the motions of her drills, dressed in a man's clothing, as she was wont to when she could find some excuse for it.

She wore his sword belt, crossed over with her own. They were paired blades, just as they were paired siblings, each the same weight and length, interchangeable tools. She spotted him approaching and let out a cry of relief that she swiftly masked with a joke. "Your head's still on, so they didn't lay you down and lop it off as soon as they saw you. Your neck looks a bit red, did they try to hang you like some common cutpurse instead?"

He glanced around, the pale sand on the ground bore only her footprints. It seemed that nobody was spying upon them. "Not yet, but there is still time."

She drew his sword and tossed it to him. It fell, untouched to the sand at his feet. "Come spar with me for a bit, maybe I'll save the hangman the effort."

"I'm not in the mood." He bent to pick up the weapon and tidy up after her out of habit. "We need to talk."

"Talk while we spar." She assumed a low guard position. The tip of her blade angled towards his feet. "How often do you leave your sword hanging on the wall these days? It will become as rusty as you."

Reluctantly, he turned until his body was side-on to her. The sword still loose in his hand. "Neither my sword nor my skills are your concern"

"I'd say most things about you are pretty concerning, actually." She feigned an attack, but he was unconvinced.

"I am really in no mood to cross blades with you, figuratively or not. Can we please just talk?" This time there was no feign, he had to sweep his blade up and across his body to deflect her thrust. "Harmony."

"Who is stopping you from talking? I'm all ears, I cannot wait to hear what was so important that you couldn't even send your sister word that all was well."

She swiped at his face, slow enough that he needn't even have parried, but out of habit he did. With a twist of her wrist and a sudden push, she locked their blades together between them. She giggled in his ear. "Rusty."

They were evenly matched with his natural advantage in weight and reach counter-balanced by the musculature and reflexes that she had built through years of training just like this. He could not force her back, but neither was he willing to strike her with his hands. She had no such compunctions. Her slap set his ears ringing and he reeled away. "Harm, there was no time."

"No time to write a note? No time to ask one of the million servants in the palace to carry it to me? All day I have been waiting for the worst. Waiting for word that you were...Have you got a heart, dear brother, or is there naught but ice beneath your breast?"

Her blade danced and darted in the afternoon's hazy light. Flitting like the dragonflies they used to watch over the ponds. She was right enough, he was rusty. He could feel a sweat beading on his forehead just from turning aside this little flurry. "They want me to do some work for them."

"Oh I see, you're a big man in court now, that is why you didn't have time to send a note." She countered his clumsy riposte by stepping inside his guard and stomping down onto his instep. He sprang back with a grunt of pain.

The next thrust, he slapped away with more force than was entirely necessary. "Will you stop it. There were more pressing concerns than your worrying."

"More pressing concerns?" His eyes tried to track the swishing tip of her sword, but she had always been better, always been faster. Her sword slipped right in past his guard and the flat tapped the underside of his chin. Perfect and precise. "You prick."

“Mother is dead.”

The tip of her sword wobbled, scratching a line across his throat. “What?”

Artemio let his own sword drop to his side. “She died. Quite some time ago. Father didn’t bother to inform us.”

The sword fell away from his neck. Harmony’s hair fell forward over her face. “She’s dead?”

“I’m sorry, Harm.”

“Sorry? You’re an idiot. She can’t be dead. Who told you she was dead? The Cervas? You know they’re all liars.” Her sword flicked back up again, pointed at his chest again. Wavered. “What did they say, she caught crotch rot off our whoremonger father? You know they’re liars, and you swallowed every word that they told you.”

Artemio took a step back. “She was killed. A hired knife, sent for father..”

She stepped to him again but her cuts were clumsy, angry. Easy to predict and deflect. “If it was sent for him, he should have been the one to receive it.”

That stopped Artemio dead in his tracks. “Harmony.”

“Oh don’t pretend you’ve got a sense of propriety.” She scoffed. “Nobody hates Father more than you. You practically salivate at the thought of your inheritance.”

Artemio wet his lips. “I want nothing from that man.”

“See! That isn’t what loving sons say about their fathers.”

He managed to bat her sword wide and step inside her reach, only to be rewarded with a backhand across the jaw that sent him stumbling.

“Harmony.” He wiped the blood from his lip. “You need to stop.”

She brought her sword down on him. He only saw the shimmer of it. Death shining blinding bright in the sun.

He could never have brought his sword around to parry. He could never have done anything to save himself if he were alone. But he was never alone.

As the blade came down, Artemio opened and the wind whipped. Artemio could never have turned the blade, but Bisnonno Fiore could.

The old king rode up through Artemio and the whipping winds he carried with him snatched the rapier from Harmony’s hands.

She whispered. “Mother.”

He dropped his sword and surged forward to catch her. Artemio wrapped his arms around her as the tears began to flow. He let his own come too.

They stood all alone at the back end of the gardens crying out their eyes for the one parent that had ever shown them the slightest amount of affection.