

Oath of a Rat
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112

The castellan led Artemio through a fresh set of unmarked passages and spiral staircases until they emerged ever so briefly in the public part of the palace. Stepping out from behind a tapestry, the castellan struck a frantic pace to bring the young guest to one of the guest room unseen and Artemio had to jog to keep up, even though it felt somewhat sacrilegious to be running in the palace. Mother would have had his head.

Once more the workings of his mind seemed to seize up at the thought of his mother. A key was pressed into his hand, and the Castellan stood watch in the hallway as Artemio slipped inside to the stuffy silence of the room that had been designated for his predecessors.

The bed was missing the down mattress, and there were some rust coloured marks on the flagstones below that explained precisely why. This was not only the depository of all the information that the Cerva had collected about their mysterious assassins, it was also the scene of one of the crimes.

Whoever had slaughtered the man lying sleeping in his bed had left the papers undisturbed. Or had at least removed the information that they wanted removed with more subtlety than the stains that Artemio now spotted on the drapes and roof would suggest they possessed.

To lose so much blood, the man must have been torn limb from limb. Artemio had another brief flash of his mother's face. Was this how she'd died? Shredded by some impossible assassin. Body parts scattered. The mind he had always been so proud of betrayed him now. The patterns in the blood told him their gruesome story and his imagination overlaid it on his parent's bedchamber.

He had to confront this horror if he meant to go on, but he meant to do so on his own terms. There was still blank paper aplenty in this room, and he would not be able to read any of many stacks filled with notes until he had cleared this miasma from his own mind. On the paper before him, he scribbled; Contessa Loretta Volpe. Who? How? Why?

Neither of the first two questions had answers, or even the hope of answers at this moment in time. He would have to read through both the reports that his father had forwarded to the kings, added to the pile of mail by the door to this chamber sometime before his arrival, and the descriptions of the previous murders.

Who did it benefit for Mother to die? If it had been his father, then there would at least have been some logic to it. Were some foreign power at work to destabilise the current dynasty then it made perfect sense to remove father. Without the House of Cerva, many would default to following the Volpe and even if his power could not be assured in the long term Father would still serve as a stabilising influence when a provocateur would want chaos.

Beside the word why, Artemio wrote Count Cleto Volpe. Despite their vociferous differences of opinion, it was well known among those who hung on such rumours that the Volpe marriage had been a love-match, and that they still shared their bedchambers even now after all these years. If she had been slain in her bed, as so many others seemed to have been, then it was plausible that the assassins had meant to slay her husband instead.

She had no standing or position outside of their household, and targeting her to distract Father with grief would be ill advised. It may have distracted him from the everyday running of his estates, but only because he was devoting every waking moment to destroying whichever enemy had struck at him. Artemio could not conceive of a conspiracy that could so cunningly navigate every other aspect of their plans yet be fool enough to light a fire under Cleto Volpe. It had to be an accident.

The door creaked open. Artemio had been given the castellan's key, and he had locked up behind him. Perhaps he was going to learn the secret of how the assassins killed people in locked rooms faster than he had anticipated.

If they meant to take him as easily as the simpering courtiers who'd come before, the assassins were in for a rude awakening. Cleto Volpe may have been a known danger to their plans, but Artemio had done well to keep his own presence and capabilities well hidden from the world at large. Even the House of Seven Shadows did not yet know his limits.

The curtains in the chambers were drawn, the fireplace unlit, only the candelabra above illuminated the space. Any shade could have put the candles out, yet in times of crisis, it was always going to be to Bisnonno Fiore that Artemio reached. His great grandfather had once been a king, and his death had been brief but brutal. Such things gave power to a shade.

The familial connection had made it all too easy to convince Fiore that Artemio was the best match for him, yet even as he fluttered on the edge of fading away the old shade took convincing to drink his fair measure of the younger generation's life to sustain himself.

This time he got only a sip. A single ruddy hair on Artemio's head turned white. Artemio did not need Fiore to ride him, only for him to pass through the room. The dead king's touch spread chill throughout Artemio, but it was a small price to pay.

With only a brief shudder of effort as the cold wind tore through the room, every candle snuffed out. Wax spattered down around Artemio in a rain, but he felt nothing. Fiore departed just as swiftly as he came. Had he a mind left, it would have rebelled at visiting the palace where he had been murdered.

The figure now silhouetted in the doorway was not a striking figure. Indeed, Artemio could think of few figures less imposing than the tiny woman that shuffled inside, tutting at the dust and the darkness. She wore a servant's simple garb, her back was bowed, and there was the unmistakable swish of a tail over the flagstones behind her. A mongrel.

She made her way across the room with practiced ease, sidestepping furniture until she reached the fireplace, tinderbox and tapers on the mantle. That was where Artemio caught her, hand brushing beneath her furred chin to lock around her throat. "How did you get through that door?"

His grip on the sides of her neck was tight enough to show his strength, without pinching the airway she needed to reply. At first she made nothing but a strangled squeak of terror. "What?!"

"How did you come by a key to this chamber when the castellan gave the only copy to me?"

She croaked out. "I'm the maid?"

He shook her then, and her shawl fell back, exposing the extent of her depraved mutation. Buck teeth protruded over her lips. Thick black hairs marred her olive skin. Her ears had grown huge and rounded.

Mongrelised with a mouse or more likely a rat. Disgusting. It took a force of will not to toss her away and wipe his hands. Instead he had to move closer, growling in her ear, "You have keys to every room in the palace?"

"Yes, my lord. I mean. No, my lord." She was quivering within his grasp. "Master of the Chambers has the wing keys. Hands them out with his orders."

Artemio pushed her away and swiped his palms down his trousers. He could still feel the hair prickling at them. "This chamber is not to be touched, nor cleaned, nor serviced. Make that clear to your Master of Chambers. If he asks why, direct him to the castellan."

"Yes, my lord. I'm sorry, my lord."

She made a break for the door now that his hands were no longer on her, but already, his mind was spinning with possibilities. He put his foot down on the hem of her skirts, inadvertently nipping her tail. She jerked to a halt. "Who pays you?"

"My lord? The Master of Coin gives us our pay once every..."

"Don't pretend that you don't know what I'm asking you."

She was the very picture of wide eyed innocence, but for her verminous countenance. "My lord?"

"There's lace on your shawls, girl. I felt it. A chambermaid doesn't make lace money. Give me the name of the generous patron who lines your pockets and sent you here this day."

Her eyes darted from side to side, innocence beginning to evaporate as she sought an escape route and found none. "I don't know what you could mean, my lord."

Those who bound themselves to shades were made sensitive to certain connections by their exposure to the unseen world. When creatures shared their life with each other as mongrels did with their bond-beasts, it was invisible to the naked eye, but all too obvious to a student of the House of Seven Shadows.

Artemio's hand darted out and squeezed. To a bystander, he would seem to be molesting some poor maid, and in all likelihood, they would have looked away. She was just a servant, after all. Yet it was not the flesh of her breasts that he had crushed inside his hand but the rodent that was nestled between them. It let out a terrible shriek and struggled in his grasp, but it could not bite him through the embroidered surface of her blouse, while he could crush it with a twist of his fist.

The maid wailed. "Please my lord. Please don't hurt her."

"Tell me what I want to know, and there need be no more hurt this day."

"They'd kill me Lord," She was still shaking as she spoke, it gave her voice a vibrating timbre. "If they found out I've told on them."

"Then we must endeavour to ensure that they do not find that out. Now give me the name."

As it turned out, it was not a name, but a who's-who of Covotana's high society. Every one of them was curious as to who the kings might rope in next to continue his fruitless shadow war, so at the first mention of a visitor to the solarium this day a half dozen missives had arrived at the girl's boarding.

Where most of the palace servants might find some small patronage from curious courtiers, this mousey-girl had instead accepted every offer that came her way. She hadn't the wit to realise it, but this left her in a very precarious situation.

A single patron could have protected her if it came out that she had been passing him information, or at least provided her with some pension after her flogging on their behalf, but should the time come that she was exposed while on a dozen payrolls, her lack of loyalty was liable to be considered reason enough to abandon her to the wolves.

When Artemio took the time to explain this to her, it was not out of kindness, but cruelty. He needed for her to understand just how easily her life could end, even if he released his grip on the rat that he'd plucked from her blouse. "When the truth comes out, you shall have no friends in high places to keep you from the headsman. Rather you will have secured for yourself more powerful and numerous enemies than any one person could hope to cultivate in a lifetime of wickedness."

"Nobody is going to know, you said." Somewhere in his litany of veiled threats, tears had welled up in the eyes of the maid. If she couldn't school her emotions for the breadth of a single conversation it was frankly amazing that she hadn't been caught out yet.

He began to second guess his own decision. "Nothing in this life is free. I will not share your secret with the world, but in exchange I expect you to share the world's secrets with me. Not only do I wish to know everything that you are telling your patrons, I want to know everything that they are telling you. There is treachery afoot in the palace, and I mean to root it out by whatever means are necessary."

She blinked the tears away. Eyes glinting once more. "So you'll be employing my services too, my lord?"

Artemio could feel the bait being laid, but he allowed it. "So long as our arrangement remains confidential, I shall keep your secret."

"Might you be paying, my lord?" There was a hint of a cheeky smirk there. A glint of buck teeth. "To ensure my loyalty? The going rate is..."

The smile that Artemio returned her was pure condescension. "Your loyalty to me is already ensured. After all, I hold the other half of your soul in my hand."

The rat sat passively between Artemio's palms. Pressed, but not crushed. The connection that mongrels shared with the beasts they bonded was not well studied, but the theory was that they had been gifted the lesser part of the talent those who bound shades used to extend their rapidly dwindling years. But without the wit or training to correctly bind themselves to an impresario and share their lifespan with another human, the mongrels instead found solace in the beasts of the earth. Cutting their own years brutally short by sharing them with a creature that expired all too swiftly.

Artemio tightened his grip. "This little delight shall remain in my care until our task is done, then I shall gladly return her to you."

For a moment it seemed the girl would turn feral. He saw her tense, ready to pounce. He had heard rats could turn vicious when cornered and very briefly regretted that his sword belt was still on its hook back in the House of Seven Shadows. The rat in his hands let out a squeal as he tightened his grip on it, and that snapped her out of it in an instant. "Please, my lord. Please. Don't be hurting us."

"I have no intention of doing anything so crass." Artemio turned his crushing grasp into a gentle stroke down the rat's spine. "Your pet shall remain in my care for so long as my duty continues, and at the end of that duty I shall return her to you, well fed and cared for."

"You can't. None of the others... You can't do this. It ain't right."

"Neither is spying on the people who put a roof over your head. I suppose that we are both immoral at heart. Though I have the justification of necessity while you only had avarice."

She reached out towards her rat, as though instinct rather than rational thought guided her. The tears came again, just as ineffective as their first wash over Artemio's sympathies. "You're a monster."

Artemio shrugged. "Show me a man who says there is no monster in him and I'll show you a liar."

In the face of such apathy, there was little the maid could do but obey. She fetched Artemio a storm-lantern, and watched as he removed the candle and deposited her rat inside before twisting it shut with wire. Neither girl nor rodent gave much in the way of argument.

He gave her no reassurances from that moment on. Only instructions. "I shall expect to hear from you once every week, if I have not, I shall assume that our arrangement is at an end. If you hear anything pertinent to the assassinations wracking the court, reach out to me immediately. If you serve me well in this, there may be a place for you in my household, where you might be shielded from the consequences of your foolish overcommitment."

"I wouldn't live under your roof if you paid me." The maid seemed to have some spark left in her, despite Artemio so thoroughly defeating her.

"A free servant, even better." He had settled at his desk, and watched her as she lit a taper, and the candles above them. She stood staring defiantly at him with those beady little eyes for a long moment before he tutted. "I am certain you have other duties to attend to."

With much stomping of feet and swishing of her tail, she departed. That was one step forward at least. A spy in the palace. Albeit a poorly placed one.

The rat made a little chirp in its lantern, and Artemio peered in at it and sighed. He was aware that if left to their own devices rats would eat more or less anything that they could set their teeth to, but he had no idea what they were meant to eat. A trip to the library would be necessary. Presumably someone throughout all of history had kept one as a pet and had the foresight to leave instruction behind.

He had taken a name for neither the servant or the rodent, and he now wondered if it might have been an oversight. If this investigation stretched on, he could hardly be expected to call the two of them Maid and Rat for weeks on end. A glance around the room furnished him with a solution. Above the bedframe, spattered with blood, was an oil painting of the queen mother, now sadly departed.

"Make yourself comfortable, Daria. We have a long and studious day ahead."

She chirped once more.

"Indeed, my predecessors have left me a mess of ill-filed papers to untangle. How astute of you to notice."

The rat turned around a few time before laying down on the far side of the lantern, facing away from him. "I have been in the palace for only a morning and I am already reduced to talking to rodents. This does not bode well for my sanity."

When there was no response. He had no more excuse to ignore the work set before him. Starting from the most yellowed looking vellum, he began to read.