

**9 - The Distant Drums**  
*Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1*

Kagan was a prisoner again. Trapped on the ground. Trapped in the palace. Pinned in place by the pull of the earth below and the stone above. Over time, he had become numb to it. Suffering, but never thinking on it. Now it was as though the wound were opened fresh.

The pompous ass of a king was lounging on one of the half-chair half-bed things that the Espherans seemed obsessed with. He had bundled papers on his knee and a pen that kept scratching as Kagan waited patiently. There seemed to be no rhythm to the motion, a spasmodic twitch of the hand, another mark of ink on paper. It had been minutes since the servants had departed and taken with them the last vestiges of conversation.

Kagan jumped when the man finally spoke. Never looking up from his etchings. “At what speed should we expect the main body of the Arazi force to proceed?”

Annoyed with himself for being startled, Kagan’s voice was an even deeper rumble than usual. “If he brought everything he had, slow. An army only moves as fast as its slowest unit, and some of the thunder lizards are too big for haste.”

The king’s brow raised, quizzical. “And should we expect that he brought all that he had?”

“Last time he didn’t, and you ran him off.” Kagan shrugged his shoulders. Uncomfortable in the courtly clothes that had been foisted on him. Handmade by some poor bastard in the lower depths of the castle to fit his gargantuan measurements. “The man’s full of big ideas, but he’s got the biggest ideas about himself. You’ll have stung him with that win. Might have made him want to come at you with everything.”

At last Artemio looked away from his scribbles. “Might?”

“If it were me, I’d only bring the Aslinda and the fliers. Come on fast, strike hard before you could mount a defense. But that’s me, and I don’t... I don’t think like an Arazi.” Kagan trailed off.

In the old days, when force was respected above all else, he’d have been able to guarantee that the Arazi would have marched with full numbers against any enemy that repulsed them

once, to prove beyond a doubt that there was no weakness in their tribe. But now, things had changed so much, the nature of both dragons and men were intertwined beyond the point of unpicking and twisted further by his father's designs to reshape both people into a singular weapon.

The king rolled his eyes and returned to his papers. "I must say, for all that you are our preeminent expert on them, you'd think that you might have more solid ideas of their tactics."

"Could tell you how they fought a hundred years ago, but things change." Kagan shifted uncomfortably. He could wear a harness of leather like he was born to it, wear the furs of dead beasts without need for tanning them but this crispy shirt fabric they'd stuffed him into itched like the fabric were made of fleabites and straw. "Can't make any promises."

Artemio allowed his papers to drop once more, condescended to look at Kagan directly once more. "Imagine for a moment that you are Konus..."

Kagan cut him off. "No."

He'd spent too much of his life with people thinking that he was just another Konus. That he was his father's son or sworn to such obedience that they spoke in the same voice. It was not so, and he would not pretend it was so for the amusement of this little nobody with a shiny hat.

Artemio clearly though that Kagan did not understand what was being asked of him from the barely concealed contempt he showed. "I am not asking you to assume his mantle in truth, only to think as he thinks for a time."

"No." Kagan growled again. "He's a monster, and I'm not going to make myself one."

"Then allow me." Artemio turned his attention back toward his papers once more. "I am Konus, my ego is bruised, but despite my wrath, I have a very specific target still in mind. One that I captured and that has slipped my grasp and escaped from my place of power. I have been embarrassed in front of my vassals and must make a show of power to maintain their loyalty. How is that best achieved?"

"Total war." It was the Arazi way. Something that these soft nations of the south could not really comprehend. They lived off the land, off trade, off having a whole swarm of peasants running around and fetching and carrying to keep their few warriors in the field. The Arazi were all warriors. They ate what they could steal from the men they'd killed. "All-out attack."

The king held up a proclamatory finger. "Yet, I am not a foolish man, and I understand that my target has great mobility on her side."

“Split the army.” Kagan pushed his shoulders back against the stone behind him as he spoke, trying to itch the spot between his shoulders that his hands couldn’t reach. He should have told them he’d rather be naked than wear this awful shirt. “Rush ahead to try and catch her with the Aslinda but keep the rest marching on.”

Another mark on the page. A scratch of ink beside something already written there. “That is what he would do?”

Kagan’s hairless brows drew down over his eyes. He didn’t know what the game was, but he knew when he was being played with. “You’ve already decided it is. So why are we talking about it?”

Artemio cast a glance over to the chamber door, as though ensuring that they were entirely alone, before giving his answer. “I find it difficult to trust. Some might say that this is a failing on my part, but I have always considered it to be one of my virtues, if I have any.”

“So what, this is a test?” Kagan rocked forward off where his shoulders had been rubbing the wall, onto the balls of his feet. “See if I give the same answers you’ve already got?”

Once again, the little king looked up to meet his glower. Perhaps his own stare was intimidating to the little people he commanded, but Kagan had stared down dragons. Artemio would need to do better. Glancing away first to return to his work, the king sighed, “To see how you think.”

“I think we’re both wasting our time.” Kagan settled back. The fabric of the shirt catching on the rough-edged scales across his back. “I might have plenty to spare, but you don’t.”

“Your company is reward enough, my friend.” Artemio forced a smile. It would have looked genuine, but Kagan could feel the absence of all feeling behind it. The burden of empathy.

“Don’t recall us being friends.” Kagan growled. “Last we spoke alone I’m pretty sure you set me alight.”

Artemio let out a little huff of laughter. “You may recall that you were trying to murder me at the time.”

“Doesn’t sound too friendly.” Kagan gave him a smile, showing off his shark-like teeth. They were not blackened like the ones you’d find in a dragon’s mouth, but they certainly bore the same triangular point to them.

Artemio released his papers to flutter down onto his lap and clapped his hand on his leg. “Consider this a fresh start for both of us. There is no reason that we cannot ally ourselves. You and I, we want the same things...”

Kagan cut him off dead yet again. He’d heard all this sort of rhetoric before a thousand times through the years. “I doubt it.”

Once more, Artemio seemed on the brink of a sigh before he pulled himself back. “We both care for the women in our lives, and we wish for them to be well. The fact that those women, yours, and mine, seem to be... entangled, means that for their sakes we must at least attempt to emulate their bond.”

Kagan just stared at him for a moment. If Artemio thought that reminding him of the way that he’d set his sister to latch onto Orsina and manipulate her was going to make him want to be closer, then he was incorrect. He could see some part of the girl Harmony’s appeal, but only in small doses. He bared his teeth once more. “If you think I’m planning on entangling with you the same way, you’re in for a fright.”

“Coarse.” The king was unable to hide the beginnings of a sneer after hearing that. “I mean only that we must be friends to each other, for their sakes. And it is well known that friendship grows from understanding.”

Kagan had listened to enough of this crap. “Understand this then. You’re Konus.”

Still acting as though his guest was a little slow on the pickup, Artemio settled back on his lounging seat. “We can probably dispense with that little thought experiment now.”

“No.” Kagan’s false smile became a grimace, then a growl. “You’re Konus, writ small. You’ve got a bit of power and you’re hoarding all you can and trying to bring everyone in the world to heel. The same evil that’s in him is in you. The evil that makes a man look at the world and think it should belong to him.”

It had probably been a good long time since anyone had told this king the truth. It was a hazard of being powerful, that everyone else lied about everything to get in your favor. Truth telling had always been Kagan’s value, until he crossed a line with his father that could not be uncrossed, and his unwelcome truths became a division between the two of them.

Artemio attempted to play it off as though it were nothing, but Kagan thought he saw a glimmer of remorse somewhere behind those narrowed eyes. “I am not certain that my ambitions

should be considered evil, any more than my natural lack of trust. They are simply aspects that must be acknowledged.”

“It’s evil.” Kagan had no interest in dancing around the subject until they were both blue in the face. “And it always leads to the same end.”

Another sardonic glance. “So we cannot be friends because you consider me your moral inferior?”

There was no tone to the voice to give Artemio away, but Kagan had senses that humans did not. He felt the amusement and contempt that flowed behind the words. The Espherans looked at him and saw a beast, a savage, the idea that he could look at them and feel the same way was too perplexing to engage with.

He kept his own voice steady, because he was still in this man’s house, whether he liked it or not. “No. We can’t be friends, because a man like Konus can’t have friends. He only calls a man friend to use the word like a cudgel later to get what he wants.”

There was something almost like a pout on Artemio’s face. It made Kagan want to cave it in. “You believe that I am incapable of the softer emotions? That I do not care for others?”

Kagan’s laughter came unbidden. Hoarse and heavy. “Put all your so-called friends on one side of a scale and power on the other, I can tell which side will hit the table.”

It brought Artemio, who never seemed to be lacking for words, to a state of silence. A long stretching silence that would have made any of his little underlings trip over themselves to fill it. Kagan felt no such compulsion. He preferred the quiet if truth be told.

Eventually, Artemio folded first. “For all that you look like a barbarian, you are surprisingly astute. I do not agree with your analysis, but it is a better one than I would have thought you capable of making.”

That was the nicest thing that any of these Espherans had managed to say to him yet, and still it was an insult. Well, Kagan knew how to meet force with force and fight fire with fire. “Hard to be friends when you think you’re better than everyone around you too.”

“Well I am a king, that does come with a degree of superiority implied.”

There was just a hint of a smirk there. That same sneering superiority that Kagan had encountered everywhere he looked in this blighted land. Kagan did not smile. Couldn’t really smile here, without everyone thinking he meant to chew on them thanks to his jagged teeth. But

he could speak soft and true. “Crown never made you think you were the smartest man in the room.”

“No,” Artemio turned his attention back to his papers. “That was experience.”

“Let me tell you something I had to learn hard, boy.” Kagan was across the room and looming over Artemio before the one-armed king could even cast his pen aside. “You’re never the best. There’s always going to be someone smarter, or stronger, or faster. You live long enough to get some more experience, you’ll realize that, and you’ll make peace with it.”

Artemio’s face lost all emotion. As though the soul had left his body. Even to Kagan’s empathy it was as if he’d just vanished. “Well, if you insist that we cannot be convivial, then I shall dispense with the pleasantries. Where are my sister and your dragon?”

Kagan took a step back, then closed his eyes. Feeling for them. “In the air.”

Artemio let out a little tut. “Should they not have made contact with the Arazi by now?”

“Depends.” Kagan attempted to shrug, but the cloth of the damnable shirt caught on his back once more and continuing the motion would likely have ripped it.

When he met Artemio’s gaze, one of the boy’s brows was raised once more. Someone must have told him it looked imperious, rather than like he was puzzled all the time. “Upon what?”

“Your towers shouted the minute they heard wings flapping, but an Arazi army, it sends scouts out ahead. Keeps its eyes open. Odds are, they sent up the alarm on the scouts, not the army. Scouts wheel back to the army body at the end of the day.”

Artemio’s pen scratched all the swifter, though he did not glance down. “That is the kind of helpful information that I could have made use of days ago.”

Another abortive shrug. “You didn’t ask days ago.”

There was no mistaking the sharp edge to Artemio’s words this time. “Feel free to volunteer information before it become too late for it to matter.”

He wasn’t going to be offered up another opening like that. Kagan sank down into the too-small chair opposite the king’s lounging. “This isn’t going to end how you want it to.”

Once more his statement brought the room to silence, but this time he did not feel as though it were pressurized. Artemio was not trying to make him speak, he was pondering his answer.

Eventually he said, “It is rare indeed for anything to end how I want it to. If it did, then I would not be king and Espher would be at peace.”

Kagan let out a snort. “You’re saying you don’t want to be king? You?”

“It would not have been my first choice.”

Kagan wasn't going to call a king a liar to his face. Not again. “Right.”

“If I had wanted to be king, then there were a great many easier ways to go about it, I can assure you.” Artemio did emanate a little sadness as he spoke to Kagan's immense surprise. “I am king, because there was nobody else.”

He pointed in the vague direction of the vacuous courtiers lingering outside the room.

“Throw your crown out that door and you'd have fifteen people prove you wrong.”

“There was nobody else who would be capable of guiding Espher through...” Another weary sigh that Kagan could feel the weight of. “All this.”

Whether it was true or not. Kagan could feel that Artemio believed it to be true. He was either delusional or the available crop of potential leaders were a truly miserable selection.

“Altruism?”

Artemio went back to his writing, as though he had not been interrupted. “Duty.”

Kagan felt fire on his flank. Sudden and lancing. He curled in the air, mindful of the precious cargo clinging to his back. There in the cloud bank, shadows. Battle cries.

He grunted out. “Shut up.”

Wings tucked in flush against his side he dropped, spinning down to gain distance and speed on his attackers.

Artemio's brow rose again. “I beg your pardon.”

A lurch as his wings spread, the press of the bodies on his back as their direction changed. The brush of grass over his wingtips before the rise.

Kagan grunted with the effort of trying to be in two places at one time. To be still and seated and to be twisting in motion. “Yelena, she's... they're...”

Cold. The font that connected him to Yelena felt frozen solid. Yet the life drained from her as fast as she could replenish it. Some parasite draining her of life. Great blades of air and flame sweeping up past her outstretched wings to burst apart both cloud and Aslinda alike.

“They have made contact with the enemy.” Artemio smiled and made a little tick on his papers. “Good.”

Another lance of flame, this one from Yelena mouth, searing a line across a leathery wing, splitting it, sending wyvern and rider into a frantic spiral down to the ground. Satisfaction.

Bloodlust. Victory. More flames, licking at Yelena's tail. Stopped with a sudden rush of cool water. A fresh made cloud washing out to envelop them. Hide them from sight.

Kagan shook as he experienced it. He should have been there. He should have been on Yelena, fighting as one, as they were meant to be. "They're... fighting."

"I expected as much, tell your dragon to break away." He paused then added. "Head south-east."

Even if Yelena could hear his thoughts, she was lost in the chaos of the war in the skies. The shifting flows of air as one stream then another rushed upwards as the heat of her breath took hold. Through gritted teeth, Kagan snarled. "I do not command her."

"I do." Artemio's condescension dripped from every word. "Tell her what I said."

"She couldn't hear me, even if I did." Flames washed over him, his wing cocked up to shield his riders. Enough heat that it should have torn the fine membrane apart, if not for the sudden cold that passed right through it in a wave. Heat and cold. Fire and ice. Impossibilities that made everything work. That made Yelena and her riders invincible even in the midst of the squall. It was overwhelming, but through it all he could feel her pride burning hotter than any flame "At this distance, there is only... sensation."

Artemio's voice seemed distant compared to all that was bombarding Kagan in that moment, but the sharp tone was unmistakable "I am hinging a considerable part of my designs upon Yelena's success, if I had been informed that your ability to communicate was so limited then I'd have been less inclined to keep you close."

Kagan lurched to his feet, desperate to find somewhere he could wrap himself up in all of these feelings without being seen "I can go?"

Claws puncturing scale. Blood hot as flame. Tearing. Rending. A buffeting wind called out of nowhere to fill her wings despite the burden of dead weight until she unhooked. That same wind suddenly cast down, slapping dragons from the skies as if they were gnats. Understanding bleeding through, just as he had learned the flight of a spear from Yelena's mind. Just as he had learned the shape of the wind. Minds bleeding together. Becoming more than the sum of their parts. The majesty of it. The miracle taking place.

Artemio went on scratching at his papers. "Of course you can't go. I still need you to keep me apprised of the situation, even if the information only flows in one direction."



Each moment they fought, they fought better. Powers combining. The rough hewn shapes that Orsina had once conjured giving away to more subtle shifts. The cold of her power seeping into the blood of the serpents that filled the skies around her, sapping their speed and strength as though she'd swallowed the sun. Kagan fought to have his own thoughts. His own feelings. He caught onto his own anger and let it serve as an anchor. "So I'm a carrier pigeon."

Artemio scoffed. "Would that you were so quiet when you had nothing useful to convey."

They were diving again, but there was no tension in Yelena's shoulders now, she knew that the ground could not touch her when they were together. The pull of the earth meant nothing now. It could not even grant her speed beyond what Orsina could push into her from any direction, at any time. It was a tactic now, not a necessity. Play acting to bring the other dragons low.

The anger, he had to hold on to the anger. "You want me to tell you everything and not to speak."

Wind switching the ways it couldn't. Nature given over entirely to new possibilities. Stopping dead in mid-air not because of an updraft or a strain, but because Orsina had reached out and grasped her in her icy grasp. Cradled her in invisible hands. The wind beneath their wings gone dead. The dragons that had chased them down, spreading wings out wide and finding nothing to catch. They fell like stars, crashing to the earth, bursting apart in showers of venom and flame and flesh.

Artemio rolled his eyes, somewhere so far away from anything important. "The knowledge that my dear sister is fighting dragons is much appreciated, your commentary upon my decisions is not."

Wind came back, flowing naturally, the rising thermals of the dead dragons giving enough lift that when Yelena was released, it took only a few strokes of her wings to rise again, to gain height, make sure she was seen. This was better than victory. Better than the joy of the hunt. She might have lived forever in the dark beneath the mountain. Might have lived forever soaring through the skies as an obedient little servant of the Arazi. If she had, she never would have felt this. This must have been how the gods had felt before they were burned. The whole world a tool to be manipulated for their ease. The elation as they rose. The spark of delight as they were sighted, but the aslinda who should have been easily her match quailed at the sight of her. She was more than any of them. They were more than any of them could have ever been.

Anger. Kagan felt it slipping away from him. He clung desperately, like a child being snatched from its mother. “Don’t like being called a bastard, stop being a bastard.”

Artemio chuckled at the insult. “I’m beginning to see why you were exiled.”

It would have been so very easy to go after the Aslinda. The little wyvern in the sky wouldn’t have proven a challenge despite all their numbers. There weren’t enough of them to drown Yelena in their blood, so there weren’t enough of them. She made a gentle turn, showing them her contempt, showing them her tail, and then with steady strokes of her wings she set off.

With that, there came some peace from the torrent of sensation. Kagan was able to slump back down into his creaking chair and sighed. “They’ve broken away. They’re being chased.”

Nodding absently, Artemio continued with his scribing. “According to plan.”

Kagan had to close his eyes now to feel them, now that the rush of combat was done. He had to reach for them instead of the thunder of their hearts overpowering him. “Yelena isn’t hurt, but I can’t feel Orsina.”

“I would imagine that she is channeling her shades at the moment.” Artemio’s eyebrow raised, and he began scribbling another little note to himself. “I do not wish to delve into the metaphysics of our respective connections, but I suspect that would be antithetical to your emotional connection.”

It was enough to bring Kagan back to the moment. “You don’t feel when you’re using your shades?”

“You feel, but whether those feelings are your own or those of the shade is a subject of much debate.” “I could not say how that might appear to an outside observer, because your... situation with Orsina is literally unprecedented. I have no references to draw upon, only my own supposition. I would suppose that you cannot sense that which shades feel, as it is beyond your ability.”

Reaching out with more focused intent, Kagan found that he could sense her, if only by the empty hole where she should have been. “She’s there, just... far away.”

A glance to the map on the table beside him brought forth Artemio’s reply. “There is the entirety of Espher between you.”

“Further.”

The king shrugged and settled back to his writing. “So long as you are able to continue relaying updates to me, the perceived distance is not of import.”

“Carrier pigeon.” Kagan nodded. “Got it.”

“You are more than a carrier pigeon. You are also a reference text.” There was a smile playing over the little man’s lips that Kagan did not like. “Explain the limitations of the Arazi empathic abilities in combat. I wish to prepare countermeasures.”

**10 - The Last Wife**  
*Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1*

Three days and three nights had passed. Mountains bathed in mist had flowed beneath them like a river's waters. On the distant horizon seen beyond Yelena's tail when she twisted around, there were still dark specks visible. Tiny birds were they closer, but dragons at this distance. Harmony could not contain her sigh each time.

This was what they had wanted, but the reality of it was miserable. They touched down once or twice in all their time travelling, so that the women on Yelena's back could see to those necessary human activities that could not be performed on dragon-back, but every other moment they needed to be in flight. Every second they were on the ground; their pursuers were closing on them.

The truly twisted thing that she had realized after their first few stops, was that Yelena could have outpaced them. She managed to regain the distance that they had lost from their stops time and again, but only when it was Harmony's turn to sleep. She would wrap her aching arms around Orsina, feel her love tighten her grip to make sure that she was safe and then when exhaustion carried her down into sleep with the gentle rocking motions of the dragon in flight, something must have changed, because by the time that she stirred again, the Arazi were back to specks on the horizon.

It had to be Orsina. The dragon's motion never seemed to change as she slept, if it did, she would have been stirred from her sleep, she had no doubt. She had seen the way that Orsina had whipped the wind around them when they fought, though she could have sworn that the girl had no shade with control over the air. She didn't ask, because in truth she did not want to know. Orsina had made the pacts that she needed to, and it was not her place to question them. Besides, every time that their wind-muffled conversation had come near to the subject sadness seemed to well up in her love, and she would not deliberately bring it back if she were given the option.

Every part of her ached. There was no moment when they were not in motion, when she did not have some fixture of the harness digging into her or rubbing her raw. Even having her arms wrapped around Orsina all day and night was beginning to lose its appeal. For an hour or so a day, it was exciting to be able to hold her like that, but then the inevitability became crushing. It was not an hour that she would be enjoying having the girl in her arms, it was every hour. And

what had been a sweet embrace soon became an exercise in shifting around in such a way as to support her through her sleep while trying to minimize the growing ache across her own back and shoulders. She might have considered herself prepared for this kind of grueling activity after her march to the north, but in truth that experience had not made her tougher and stronger, it had only provided existent aches for the new ones to latch onto.

Orsina and Yelena might have been there all the time, but her true constant companion was pain. Pain and fear that if she were to loosen her grip even the slightest bit then either she or Orsina would go tumbling from the saddle, down through the clouds and shatter upon the earth below.

By dawn of the fourth morning, she'd rather have stood her ground and fought all the dragons by herself than endure much more.

What luck then that the mountains and vineyards were giving way at last to lowland hills and home.

She had never seen the Volpe lands from above. Never seen the way that the river sliced its way across the land, the way the mercenaries were scattered about their guard-towers in half-permanent camps and the way that the durum grain fields that should have been up against the river for irrigation were thrust back on the far side of the blockades that had been assembled along it. The mountains had been a wild place, the vineyards clinging to the foothills with a desperation like Harmony's hold on Orsina, but here there was nothing of nature and everything of order forcibly enforced on a world that did not want it. The grain grew short, and the prime land was given over to the business of war, because Father had seen the value in one and not the other. He had hated Agrant with such passion that he had put a stranglehold on his own people for the small advantage of facing an enemy that would never come on the banks of the Cut.

If Art were here, he would have fixed it. She felt certain of that. It didn't matter if the two of them were fighting right now, she still knew him and how he thought. He would fix it not because he cared about the farmers that it would feed, but because the inefficiency of it all would aggravate him. And because to undo something that their father had done would have brought him joy.

All those years, her father had scraped together his pennies and traded in favors so that this place would be a bulwark against the Agrantine invasion that he'd felt so certain would come. He had hired in mercenaries and granted them land and title in exchange for their service. He had

blockaded all trade with the south, single handedly driving Espher's merchants to look to their other neighbors. All that he could do to sour Agrant's victory in supplanting the Volpe line on the throne, he had done, and now it was all for nothing.

Art had undone something that their father had done. He had undone in days what had taken years to build. The gates at the bridges hung open. Those long-suffering peasants who had labored diligently under the elder Volpe's less than tender care had been set free and marched northwards to safety. The mercenaries that had been bought at such inflated prices had been sent alongside them, to keep the people that they had once treated as dirt beneath their feet safe, and to join the mustered armies of Espher where they were gathering outside of the capitol. All of this land was being ceded to the Agrantine invasion without a fight.

The Agrantine themselves were gathered to cross the river.

Harmony had marched north with Espher when the war with the Arazi was upon them. She had seen the trail of soldiers stretching from the horizon ahead to the horizon behind. The trail behind them of camp followers and smiths, and all those other smallfolk that were necessary for an army to march at all. She had seen all of them and she had felt invincible to be surrounded by such numbers of warriors, ready to wage battle upon an enemy who she would soon discover numbered just as many. When those two armies had clashed, man and wyvern, Espher and Arazi, she had thought to herself for one brief moment that this was the only time in her life that she would see so many living people all gathered together in one place, greater than a city, more densely packed than the palace at the height of a ball.

She was wrong.

In every direction, the Agrantine stood. Robed in black, clad in armor still coke stained from the furnace. A solid wall of them, all in lockstep, a breath of air between them, and then the next perfectly ordered rank. There was nothing intimidating about a single Agrantine soldier, if anything she would normally have considered them to be something of a joke, trying to scare their opponents with dark clothes and faces hidden under their steel masks. But seeing them now massed together in their endless ranks, she could see why they struck fear into Art's withered little heart. At the end of each block rose something like a tower, cast from iron and billowing smoke into the sky. Forges perhaps, or some sort of war machine. They were wheeled, but slats protruded from their sides so that the soldiers gathered around could hoist them up for rough terrain.

The few pale flashes of bare skin and shaven heads, they were more alarming to Harmony than the armored masses, because she knew that those individuals spaced evenly throughout the legions of the empire were Saints. Masters of the sword, and warfare. Enemies that she'd been hard pressed to beat despite her talent with the blade and the full lifetime of training that she'd devoted to it. One on one, she was a match, but here and now she doubted she'd get off a quip before being gutted.

To the rear of this massed collection of humanity a great palanquin as large as a peasant's hut was hoisted onto the shoulders of a legion in itself and carried amidst the heart of the pack. It was made of the same blackened metal that marked the strange chimneys among them, and from the same fluted workings atop it, smoke did pour forth, but it was shifting in color and intensity as it vanished into the great dark cloud above. Incense smoke, a dozen different herbs at least, all burning in this bizarre contraption.

The army were already In Espher, had been for many miles, but now they were about to make the crossing at the Cut. The first good spot to hold them off, using the terrain to render their numbers useless. They must have been imagining any number of traps as they came up to the bridge.

This was likely still a surprise.

Crossbow bolts began to fly as Yelena swept down towards the Agrantine. All falling short, but nonetheless being loosed at them with all due malice. Chill already spreading across her skin, Orsina whispered. "Hold on tight."

Yelena's descent became a plummet, she was diving down into the range of the enemy crossbows even as they were being hastily restrung. Venom trailed from Yelena's lips, falling in great thick globules to spatter across the gathered soldiery, but she did not set them alight, not yet. The goal was not to engage with the Agrantine, but to make this army ready to leap into battle with the next dragon that crossed their path. Corrosive drool was the tool they meant to employ.

Drool and haste.

Beyond the pagoda to the rear ranks, Harmony could make out proper war machines, scorpions and ballistae, the kind of mechanical solutions that would tear the walls of Covotana down. The temptation to go after them, to cripple the Agrantine with one great breath of flame, it

was almost overwhelming. But they had a task that they'd been set to and giving away that a dragon served Espher would have undercut that plan entirely.

On and over they swept, circling out past the pagoda so they did not pass through the smoke rising there. Harmony did not know the constitution of a dragon, but some of those plumes looked distinctly like those you found coming out of barely cracked windows in the rougher parts of Covotana or drifting up from the courtyards of the more depraved noble parties. A drugged dragon might be a frightful sight indeed. Harmony had no desire to hear Yelena giggle. Less desire still to be on her back as she wobbled her way home.

The upturned faces of the Agrantine passed in a blur. There was no time to see if they were awestruck or consumed by terror. Yelena spat great gobbets of venom amongst them, thick and steaming, ready to burn with but a single spark. When their pursuers came, there would be fire aplenty to set such traps alight, even if matters would otherwise have been settled amicably.

They made their turn somewhere to the rear of the Agrantine lines, where the carefully ordered soldiery gave way to covered wagons and supply lines snaking off towards the enemy's own homeland. To Harmony's right she could see the distant specks of the Arazi growing ever larger, but still too far for their purposes. "Another pass."

Yelena let out a growl of disapproval, thrumming up through Harmony's legs to set all her bones quaking, but the reality of the battlefield cared not for her comfort, nor for the crossbow bolts that would soon be launched at them. They had to hold here until the Arazi were almost upon them, or they might veer off ahead of the Agrantine army and this whole fool's errand would have been for nothing. "Don't grumble so, I'm sure Orsina can screen their arrows."

Where she had before been a comforting warmth in the cold open skies, holding on to Orsina now felt like clinging to a stalactite of ice protruding up from the dragon's back. There was an expression on her face that was entirely unfamiliar to Harmony, until she recognized it as something she herself might bear. Disinterest. As though all of this meant nothing to her at all.

The wind beneath Yelena's wings seemed to be lifting now, hauling them up higher and out of range without any extra beating of skin on air. Orsina's touch no doubt. Down on the earth below, Harmony could see the soldiers of Agrant being hammered by that same hardened wind, knocked from their order to fall to their knees.

Across the armies the wind carried them until they were passing by the pagoda once more, and only then did the air about them seem to still. Yelena beat her wings against that sudden



stillness, but like those dragons and wyvern they had downed to the north, it was as though there were nothing for her to gain traction against.

She dropped like a stone.

As they fell, the last of their momentum carried them forward, Yelena's still outstretched wings catching upon anything that they could to keep them in flight, yet it seemed all too obvious that they would have no luck. They were falling now, and no force that either dragon nor woman astride it could bring to bear would undo that. Clinging close to her frozen love, Harmony wailed. "Orsina! What are you doing?"

"It." Orsina tried to turn, but it seemed as though she were held fast in the same vice that now kept Yelena's wings fixed in place. "It isn't. Me."

"What do you mean it isn't you!?" The slow spiral as they plummeted to their death lurched her from side to side. "The Agrantine don't have any Shadebound!"

Yet there below them stood a man on the platform of the pagoda. A giant of a man, forged not in the womb of some titanic woman but in the banquet halls of an Emperor. He was robed in black, but not the simple sack-cloth that adorned his saints. Velvet lay over a form more suitable for a mountain than a man. Thick fur collars surrounded the hulking semisphere of his head, making him look all the more like an egg in its nest. He had fingers thick as sausages outstretched towards them, and with a tightening of his fist, the God-Emperor of Agrant stopped them dead in the air.

For a moment that stretched out forever they just hung there. Pinned like a butterfly by the weight of his will, then with a gesture, he drew them closer. Dragging them across the sky. Yelena was in full panic, frantically trying to beat her wings, to be free, Harmony could feel the muscles shifting beneath her scaled skin, but as powerful as the dragon was, she was nothing in the face of this power.

They were shifted sideways through the sky, then brought down until they were level with the God-Emperor himself. Only then did he speak. "What do we have here?"

His voice was soft, almost delicate, and his accent was lighter than Harmony would have anticipated. It seemed strange to her that some foreign king would bother to learn the language of a people he'd never meet, yet here he was, chatting away.

"Dragons, my eyes have observed many time before. Two humans atop it? Arazi, of course, but you have neither scale nor claw." There was no way that he was speaking loudly enough for

them to hear him over the marching of his army all around them, yet his words poured into Harmony's ear like a honeyed whisper. She tried to answer, but the same force that pinned Yelena to the surface of the air was holding her too.

"The real Arazi are coming." Orsina's voice came breathy, sounding distant though she was right beside Harmony on the dragon's back. "For you and your army."

The whole mass of the man seemed to buck as he laughed, beckoning Orsina closer with a curve of his finger. She was ripped from Harmony's arms. Drawn through the air, dangling like a helpless doll until she was swaying right in front of him. "Do I have need to fear the Arazi, oh child of Espher?"

"They'll kill you." She spat the words out through gritted teeth. Whatever hold the man had over Harmony and Yelena, he had it on her too, but she had some strength to fight through it. To feel that crushing weight and still draw breath.

"They are a rabble." He lowered Orsina gently until her feet touched down upon the platform of his pagoda. Down beneath them, a little extra strain was added to the backs of the hundred unfortunates that had to cart their emperor around. "What needs a god fear their ilk?"

"Ask the gods that they burned."

For a moment, as the God-Emperor's eyes widened, the armies of Agrant stilled in their marching. Harmony could not guess how many crossbows were levelled at them in that moment. How badly this would all come apart if they did not escape before the Arazi did arrive. Then just when it seemed that the affront had been too much, his mouth sagged open and he let out a belly laugh that seemed to shake the whole pagoda. Beyond the edifice of carried iron, the laughter seemed to spread like the pox, rank after rank throwing back their heads and chortling with glee. When their god laughed, they all laughed with him.

"This is good, I like this." He paused in his laughter to ponder the right word. "Wit. My children, they are not much for wit."

Orsina was now standing fully under her own power but had only an instant to appreciate it before he crooked a finger and she slid across the smooth surface of the metal towards him. Up close he loomed over her by only a foot or so, but his girth was such that she looked like a child beside him.

“It has been long since my court flourished with laughter and wit.” He held out his meaty hand and hers was yanked up from her side to be placed inside of it. “You should come back with me when my dirty business is done in Espher. You would fill my life with joy.”

His grasp on Orsina must have been tighter than what he exerted on the others, because even from here, Harmony could see the sweat beading upon her love’s forehead as she fought back. She could not snatch her hand away from him, not with his physical strength holding her in place too, but she could resist the pressure that was flattening her hair and trying to make her nod her head. “No.”

The Emperor looked aghast before she could force her next words out, “Thanks. But no. I’m no jester.”

His hands were encrusted in rings now that Harmony saw them up close. Gems as big as her eyes rested on the backs of the fingers he now brought up to stroke at Orsina’s cheek. “Fair as you are, I’d make a wife of you.”

There was enough pressure being exerted on Orsina now that Harmony could feel it even from a distance. A crushing weight, trying to drive her to her knees in supplication. But the longer Orsina faced it down, the harder it seemed to find holding her. Before Harmony’s eyes’ the girl straightened up and met the God Emperor’s eyes. “Thank you but I am already engaged to be married.”

It was almost seamless, but Harmony could see the breath of hesitation between Orsina’s words and the emperor’s reply. The moment when he was surprised. “My compliments to your betrothed on their good fortune.”

It could not have been often in his life that he was denied what he wanted, and rarer still that he had to engage in actual conversation when he could move all the people around him like puppets.

“And my compliments to your many other wives.” Orsina managed to say through the thickening air. As if it were a jab at him. Harmony would have winced if she could move. There was a rebellious spark in Orsina that she’d always been quite drawn to, but which in their current circumstances might very well have been a suicidal impulse.

The God Emperor of Agrant bowed his head. “Deeply, they mourn for their lost sister.”

All around them, the hardened soldiers of Agrant began to weep beneath their masks. Harmony could feel tears pricking at her own eyes. It seemed to hit Orsina the hardest of all. Tears flooded down her cheeks as she struggled to spit out, "As do we."

Fire burst to life upon the northern flank as the first of the Arazi arrived. Harmony strained with all her strength against the invisible force holding her in place, but it was useless. They were sitting ducks here in the midst of it all. Target practice for the descending horde.

"Here comes now your people's true mourning." There did not seem to be any anger in the emperor's musical voice. It was as though none of this were happening at all. As though the venom bursting into plumes of fire among his loyal followers were words on a page that he was reading or play-acting on a stage. "A gift of slaughter to repay their slight."

Orsina was being lifted from the deck of the palanquin once more, hoisted by the emperor's will. She had never faced anything like this, but the power that she held inside of her seemed to recognize it well enough. With a sudden burst of cold air that washed over Harmony and Yelena, the grip was broken. Yelena dropped the final few feet to land atop the soldiers below, men who had been standing to stalwart attention but a moment ago, now crushed beneath the dragon's weight.

Harmony ran up the length of Yelena's curving neck even as she fell. Strength finally returned to her, she burned with the need to move. To get closer. To stop all of this before Orsina got herself killed. She leapt from atop the ridges of Yelena's brow for the deck of the palanquin, and found herself caught once more in a thickening of the air before she could land beside her love and the god that walked among them.

Yet still the cool waves of Orsina's power washed over her, cleansing her of the foreign influence. She may have been stopped, but she was not stilled. She still had the full motion of her body, though no friction with anything around her that she could use as leverage.

"This is a gift, Emperor of Agrant." Harmony barked out. "My brother's gift to you."

This close, the details of the man's face became all the more clear. His skin was smooth as a baby's, his lips, thick and moist, only adding to that impression. Only his eyes seemed fitting for a man of such power, beady and dark beneath his hairless brow. They were affixed on her now. A stare that might have pinned her in place, were she not already trapped by some other force at his beck and call. "You did not want the Arazi on your borders. It was half the reason you've never come after Espher before. We were a buffer for you. Well here is our gift to you. Among

those dragon riders that we've delivered to you, there is one who rules them. Konus. If you strike him down, the threat of the Arazi is over. He is the one who unified them. He is the one who holds them together with purpose."

"You lack this one's wit if you think I might believe such a deception. I do not want you for a wife."

The scorpions to the rear of the army loosed their javelins and fearsome as the dragons might have been, there was something to be said for the terror of human engineering too. For a moment the sun was blotted from the sky by the vast bolts' passage. Light returned as they struck home, then the rain of blood began. Drizzling down to quench the flames on the ground. It did not matter that they lacked the precision to pick a single dragon from the sky with such weapons when they could instead fill the sky with sharpness.

Blood rained down over the emperor too, pattering on his bald pate and slicking down his face. He did not flinch, nor respond in any way to the sudden dousing. He only had eyes for Harmony in that moment.

"War comes for your people not because it is convenient to me, but due to a matter of honor. One among your people slew my wife." He paused dramatically, as though he were in fact overcome by emotion. "My beloved wife. That is an insult that cannot go unanswered."

Orsina reached out and caught him by the hand, surprising all present into sudden silence. "If I were to marry you, as you asked, would you forget all of this?"

"Orsina, no!" Harmony gasped.

He drew his hand carefully from her grasp, glancing to ensure all of the rings were still in place. It did not seem to occur to him that lying was an option. Presumably, when one was so powerful, deception became unnecessary. "Beautiful though you may be, my blood runs slow in these elder years, such distraction as you might offer would be but temporary. Honor demands answer."

That seemed to deflate Orsina a little. As though she'd thought the idea of slotting herself under this bloated and entitled lump was some great victory that she could have won. As if his touch would not have sickened her.

"Please take no offense, dear lady. It is rare that I find one I wish to take as my own. Rarer still to find one who can resist my command. You could have been one of the greatest curiosities of my life and I the master you so dearly deserve."

He raised a hand, and a plume of dragon's fire was turned away before it could bathe them, sweeping instead over the grand edifice of his palanquin and leaving it barely more soot stained than it had been before. "Still, I am still gentleman enough to accept your answer without pressing further. You may be on your way. Go in my grace."

Harmony spoke over Orsina before she could say another word. "Thank you, your... emperor-ness."

Orsina caught Harmony's eye and finally seemed to understand the danger that they were in. The venom they had secreted across the camp was blazing now, the smog filled sky creeping lower with every moment. She ran to Harmony as the invisible strings holding both of them gave away, and seizing her by the hand, they leapt out into the open air.

Yelena rose from beneath them. Wings thundering as she fought to gain height until Orsina remembered herself and thrust wind up from beneath them. Rising into the maelstrom of dragons and screams hanging between cloud and the earth.

Once more they fell into the rhythm of war. As each dragon sighted them and turned to give chase, Yelena beat her wings all the faster, not fleeing, but pursuing that clash of scale and claw. The nearest pivoted around into the path of another flight of scorpion bolts, the next spat forth a great lance of flame that Orsina deflected with her shades and a wave of her hand.

It was only in that moment that the God-Emperor's gestures became familiar to Harmony. Orsina moved like him now. Commanding the world around her with a motion. It sent chills up Harmony's spine that had nothing to do with the suddenly chill body pressed up behind her and everything to do with the glimpse of the future that she'd just encountered.

As the dragon burst through the diverted plume of flame where it was diffusing into the sky. Yelena lunged forward, her teeth snapping into the small scales at its throat. The rider let out a gargling scream as she experienced the same death as her mount, then both fell limp to crush some soldiers below.

Harmony never even saw the one that was sweeping in at them from behind, but Orsina knew it was there, and scales and flesh parted in a line, like a cake being sliced, as it ran into the sharpened edge of air that her shades had conjured. The first she and Yelena knew of it was when the blood doused them.

In motion now, Orsina looked more like a conductor than a warrior, directing the course of the battle with gestures and rhythm. Here she pointed and there a dragon fell from the sky, gored.

There she waved, and a fresh wall of scorpion bolts swerved off course to bury themselves in the hides of the dragons around them, but never touching Yelena.

Harmony found herself touching far more of Yelena than she'd ever intended, flattening herself against the dragon's back to avoid the chaos above. Clinging to her scales when she overreached the harness. "Take us back to Covotana. Please, Yelena."

Whether the dragon heard her or not, she could not say, but mere moments later they swept up into the thick black clouds over the Agrantine army, and a moment later they were free in the open sky above. Orsina sank back down into the seat behind Harmony with a sigh of what was probably relief.

"So that's what passes for a god these days? I'm not impressed." The voice was Orsina's but the words... they didn't sound like her at all. Reaching back to take her hand, it was still deathly cold, but Harmony told herself it was just the chill of the air, nothing more.

Yelena drove on towards home, hearth and roost, and if any dragons or wyverns managed to break free of the clouds to give chase, they soon thought better of it.

**11 – No Man’s King**  
***Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1***

Artemio had become so accustomed to his shadow that he did not think twice as Kagan came lumbering after him when the day in court was done. In his chambers he set aside his kingly garb, and instead dressed in the manner of an entirely different leader. Clothes handed down unwillingly by his father, and a mask that obscured his face. In the palace, he spoke for Espher as its king, but beneath the surface of the city, down in the dank caverns where cults and rebels gathered, he bore this entirely different mantle.

Changed, he stepped back out into the parlor of his suite and was headed for the servant’s passages which would by now be abandoned if his orders had been followed. He made it almost half the distance before spotting Kagan still lounging on the chaise, one scaled ridge of an eyebrow raised. “Going out, are you?”

Though the man had grated on his nerves for the duration of his tenure as an oversized carrier pigeon, they had some form of rapport built by this point. Artemio would ignore the things that the exiled Arazi said to him that could be considered insulting or treasonous, and in turn Kagan restrained himself from making a running commentary on all of the things he considered Artemio to be doing wrong until they were out of earshot of any underlings. He did not anticipate any issues now. “See if you can’t find an oversized cloak somewhere in the dressing rooms. Something that will disguise your features, if not your bulk.”

“I’m coming with you?”

Better to have the man with him. He’d blend in fine with the Last King revolutionaries as a mutant, and it would be better that they remained in each other’s company until he had fed the man sufficient lies to curb any desire he might have to discuss Artemio’s current garb. “My need to be kept updated on the battlefield has not yet abated.”

“Nothing’s changed. They hit the Agrant army, the Arazi hit it after, they left.” Despite his words, Kagan was up and moving with that strange sinuous serpentine grace that did not seem to fit with the size of his body. “Smooth flying since then.”

“Once they are safely behind our walls, I shall cease to worry, until then, I will require your presence. Now go make yourself presentable, we have an appointment to keep.”



It had been more than a season since he had last attended one of the meetings of his most secret servants. With all the work of running a country single-handedly heaped upon his shoulders, he simply could not make the time for it, despite many unexpected palace servants quietly approaching him to inform him of when the next meeting would take place.

To his shame, he had actually forgotten which of the servants in his employ at the palace were party to the conspiracy at this point. Even for someone capable of retaining such vast amounts of information there were limits, and it seemed that his were caring about which of the three various servants who cleaned out his chamber-pot was on duty on a given day.

With his scaly shadow stalking behind him, they descended first into the guts of the palace, the warren of interconnected passages and chambers that only a servant with a lifetime of service or a genius with an accurate and up to date map might hope to navigate.

From there they passed not directly into the sewers as would have been convenient, but out into the courtyard instead, where horses had churned the mud into a froth, and they soon took on the same patina of filth as was normal for the common elements of the city. He had planned his route according to the rainfall of the past days, if it had been dry, they would have diverted elsewhere.

He did not care to smell of low beasts and their leavings, but it was something of a necessity to blend in among the common people. On Kagan, it was something of a relief. Every so often, Artemio could swear he caught a whiff of something strange and alchemical about the man, like some watered-down version of a dragon's venom, or perhaps the scent released when a snake's nest was overturned in the fields. Mud and excrement may have been unpleasant, but they were still preferable to that alien aroma. "You take me the nicest places."

The joke, while feeble, drew a surprised laugh from Artemio. It may have been the first attempt at humor he'd heard from the hulking Arazi in all the time they'd known one another. "I regret that there was no ball for you to attend this eve, perhaps next time."

Kagan grumbled something in his own tongue, but for all of his presumable complaints he kept pace with Artemio all the same as they set out into the streets and down well-hidden stairways into the canals that ran through the city. "Here." Artemio paused just long enough for Kagan to see him before he seemed to vanish from sight. The access grating to the overflow drains was concealed around the curve by a clever feat of architecture. Artemio was oddly proud

of whichever of his forebearers had come up with that one. All the benefits of a full system of sewerage with none of the unsightliness.

With the mildew-stained tiles overhead almost scraping against his head despite his hunching, Kagan followed after Artemio like the loyal dog that he was. It did not matter that he was someone else's loyal dog, only that he was well trained. "Why are we in the cesspits?"

"There are elements within the court that are still... fractious after my ascent to the throne. Those who do not believe that my family has the power to hold it in the long term. Those elements must be excised so that their doubt cannot infect others."

"I remember how it's done." Kagan's voice was still a bass rumble, but there was a sharp edge to it that Artemio was not accustomed to, even when he was needling the man. "Smash the heirs' heads on the nursery floors."

"Luckily enough the Cerva were not particularly successful with regard to heirs, so there was precious little of that to navigate, but now that they are gone, every wayward branch of their family tree that had assumed power would be passed to them at the end of the twins' reign have been agitating. I need them to stop until such time as the current crisis is past."

Artemio had lit the storm-lantern he'd carried with him for the purpose of navigating these passages, so when he grinned, Kagan's teeth shone in the lamplight. "Crises are the best time to murder a king and replace him."

"Well, speaking as the king in question, I think I'd rather have those who'd see me dead sliced to ribbons instead." He strode ahead, forcing Kagan to try and keep pace or be left behind in the dark. It was a minor cruelty, making the man duck under the vaulted ceiling and shuffle along with all haste, but it did amuse him.

Still the man insisted on mockery. "Trained sewer rats down here to eat them?"

"Not far off the mark." Artemio attempted to maintain the same jovial air. "You may recall when we first met I was in pursuit of a cadre of assassins, preying upon the nobility of Espher?"

"When you set me on fire."

The man was like a terrier with a rat between his teeth. He just would not let that go.

Artemio pressed on, "Well, we are set to meet with that cadre this evening and issue them with some new targets, now that their previous master has expired."

There were twists and turns through the passages that he had to recall, back to the underground lake where he had first encountered the cult of the last king. Despite their title he

did not think they truly worshipped death, nor did he even believe that the violence that had brought them to his attention was typical of any individual within it if he were entirely honest. They were peasants, ground under the heel of nobility for so long that they felt that they had no choice but to strike back, and this little organization that they'd attached themselves to gave them the means. Individually, in their real lives, they were nobody, a maid, a gardener, a cab driver, a mill worker, but beneath a mask and cowl, they became something more. They had tasted power, and now not a one of them would willingly set down that chalice unless they were forced.

He had no intention of forcing them. Not when they provided him with so useful a tool. For some reason, they had fallen under his father's thrall, but the anonymity of the mask meant that the majority of them did not even know who their leader was, nor when he'd been replaced. It was entirely possible that his father had taken on the mantle of leadership of the group in the very same way that Artemio himself had usurped it, by killing the prior one and replacing him silently.

The sound of falling water grew louder as they approached until its echoes through the tunnels became all that Artemio could hear. Stepping out into the cavern proper was almost a relief for the abatement in noise.

Or at least, it was a relief until it became apparent that the chamber was full of people, maintaining the silence that he now enjoyed. All eyes turned towards him.

"See why you wanted me along now." Kagan rumbled softly. "I'm not your bodyguard."

Artemio raised his hand in greeting, declaring as was customary, "There is only one king."

From all quarters the answer echoed back, overwhelming even the sound of water with its sudden volume. "And his name is death."

Usually, he would not have to deal with the rabble directly except when making a speech, but whatever sub-leaders the cult had designated seemed to be absent this night. It was enough to make Artemio wish that he had learned their names.

Once there had been a wooden stage assembled by the lakeside, on which his predecessor would stand and make his declarations, but now it was all burnt away, and only the heaped blackened timbers remained for him for him to cross through the crowd and mount.

The bodies of the peasantry seemed oddly resistant this evening as he walked through them, where before he was shown the due respect and they'd parted for him, now he found his shoulders brushing against their tattered cloaks, and he had to step around some of the more

hulking half-beasts to make his way. Kagan stayed at his heels, but it seemed he did so only to voice the thoughts that Artemio himself could not give credence in his own mind. “Something isn’t right here.”

“Quiet yourself.”

A hulking mongrel stepped from his spot and into Artemio’s path. Horns protruding from the sides of his head, and thick dark hair creeping up his neck. “Should listen to your pet, boy.”

There was clearly some ill feeling over his extended absence, but he had been conveying such orders and messages as he could through the channels, he had available to him, presumably this could be diffused with some well-chosen words. “Nobody is anyone’s pet. We’re all equal here.”

That should have settled them down, the few that knew his identity would take it as a statement agreeing with their principles. Kagan would have had his waning tolerance for Artemio bolstered. Yet the bull-man seemed to bristle even more than before. “Run back to your palace, princess.”

It was becoming increasingly apparent that there had been some change in leadership in Artemio’s absence, and that his true identity had been disseminated through the populace. This presented a problem, but it also provided a degree of protection. If the cult knew who he was, then he could leverage his position as their actual king as a means of control, and of course, there was no peasant in all the world so bold that they’d try to lay hands upon a king.

He cast off his disguise, and despite knowing precisely who he was, he could see all of the nearby conspirators draw away from him as though a rock had been overturned and the viper beneath unveiled. Presumably none of them had ever laid eyes on a king before. “It is true, I am the king of Espher. Should I know shame because of that? I was born to my position in society, just as all of you were. It was chance of birth, not choice, that made me your ruler, but that does not mean that I cannot share in your opinion on matters of politics. Monarchy is an inherently unstable mode of governance, each generation born with the potential for greatness or incompetence born entirely of random chance. If a superior method could be devised, then I would be more than content to see it implemented peacefully.”

The first part, claiming that he shared in their bizarre ideas of equality between all had been the first countermeasure against his discovery that he had contrived, but the latter part was inspired, if he said so himself. Drawing on his knowledge of history to acknowledge the flaws of

aristocracy as a method of rule while placing the burden of offering up a replacement to the peasants themselves, who would have as much education in political theory and rhetoric as he had of cow birthing. It also planted a seed in the mind of the more moderate that there was a non-violent solution to things. He did not need to win them all over, only enough to create division, only united were they a threat.

“Aye, you should know shame.” Came the crackling voice of some old woman amongst the pressing crowd. “Your forefathers were thieves and murderers, taking all they pleased, giving nothing back, then passing down all the comforts their cruelty bought to you. You’ve lived in the lap of luxury from the sweat on our brows.”

To Artemio’s immense surprise, Kagan offered that sniping old hag her answer. “Are you responsible for your father’s sins?”

The Arazi’s rhetorical skills may have been honed among barbarians, but his delivery was swift and memorable. He made it sound if he himself were truly considering the philosophical question instead of trying to hammer home a point.

With that particular line of thinking currently snipped short, Artemio had the chance to present his case. “I am king, that is true. I was born into a power that you will never know. I cannot deny it. But that presents us all with a historic opportunity. An opportunity for true change in our lifetimes.”

The hubbub that had been slowly building around him rose to a furor as he said that, with one of the closest feather-headed conspirators scoffing. “As if you’d just drop it because we asked you to.”

“Of course I would!?! Who would want to be king? I do not care about being king. It is the job that I must do because there is none better suited, but should the time come that a better means of ruling comes along, I have no attachment to a crown. It would bring me great pleasure to abandon statecraft and pursue different interests.” Artemio let a little honest feeling bleed into his statements, taking a cue from Kagan’s surprisingly emotive display.

Yet it was Kagan that stabbed him in the back. “Do it then. Do it now.”

The demand was picked up by the crowd. If Artemio had been physically wearing his crown, then in all of the excitement it might very well have been snatched from his head. What luck that he had more sense than to wear expensive jewelry on this outing.

“We have no alternative.” He held up his hand for silence as the protests grew more enraged once more. “At present, Espher faces a war on two fronts. The Arazi of the northlands come to lay our people to waste and the Emperor of Agrant marches from the south with all his legions in tow. Rudderless, this ship will sink. You will fall under the rule of far more fearsome despots than I, men who would not willingly offer you the kind of magnanimity that I do.”

The great bull who’d stopped his advance to start with was now looking at him with confusion writ on his features. It was working. They didn’t know what to do. What to say. If Artemio had been oppositional or defiant then they could have rallied against him, but how could they rally against the very thing that they were asking for? “What mag... what are you offering?”

This gruffness was enough to draw an interested silence from the crowd where Artemio’s own statements were not. They wanted to see what they could get out of him. If it had been as simple as money, he’d have dipped into the royal treasury and put gold in every pocket here. The value of these peasants as spies and assassins made them a more worthwhile investment than half of the kingdom’s soldiery. They could move invisibly through every circle of society, they could strike from the heart of an enemy’s own home, without their aid, Artemio doubted that he could have made it halfway to the throne, let alone sit firmly upon it as he did now.

This would have to be quite the sales pitch.

“I want Espher united. Together we are strong, divided we will fall. I will offer everyone here amnesty for whatever crimes they have committed in the past, or by my command, and I will welcome a delegation of citizens to discuss matters of state to ensure that your views are heard.”

The crowd had fallen dead silent at this offer. Representation was likely better than any one of them could have hoped for. Most of Espher’s nobility wouldn’t have even thought to offer it. But Artemio had also lived in a family where his needs and wants were entirely disregarded, and he knew just how valuable being heard was to someone who had spent their whole life denied. Besides, just because he had said that he would listen to the peasants didn’t mean he was going to obey their every whim.

If they came to him with a suggestion that had value, he would be able to act upon it, and all the praise for each decision would be attributed to his wisdom. When they came to him with ideas that were not feasible, or ran in opposition to his own goals, he could simply refuse, with the excuse that his new advisors were simply uneducated in that particular matter.

Moreover, if they ever did overreach themselves and try to force his hand, that delegation of the commons would serve as a list of ringleaders. “When the current crisis is resolved, we can work together to create a more equitable situation, whereby violent uprising is not the only way for your voices to be acknowledged.”

That was it. He’d made his offer, angled it towards the moderates who just wanted to live their lives, all that remained to be seen was how badly they had been radicalized against the nobility. If their war was ideological rather than practical, then there was little he could do or offer that might sway them, but if they were truly interested in improving the plight of the peasantry, this was their opportunity to compromise and have all the sins of revolt washed away while still achieving some portion of their goals. No risk, all reward.

“No.” The old woman pushed through the crowd. The same haggard old thing that had demanded he felt shame. She was a rotund thing, with a shell pressing out against her cloak, giving her a bizarre silhouette down here in the torchlight. “You offer us nothing. You offer us forgiveness? We’ve done no wrong. You offer us a chance to come beg you for what is ours by right? We don’t need to ask for what we’re owe. You... you’re a crafty one, but we’re not fools, no matter how little you might think of us. There is only one king that we bend our knees to, and it is not you.”

“So you shall continue to spiral into irrelevance without direction?” He was grasping at straws now. The bodies that had parted so begrudgingly before now formed a wall behind Artemio and Kagan.

“We have all the ‘leadership’ we need.” The old turtle-hag sneered, “Our king is come.”

They had betrayed him. Betrayed Espher. There was no telling what commands their new leader had issued them regarding Artemio, but he could not imagine that there was any hope that it would be to bring him comfort. Their ‘king is come’ meant that they were throwing in with either Agrant or the Arazi. Most likely Agrant, the absent flair of their nobility would appeal to the peasants, and they would not have to fear encountering dragons in their day to day lives.

It made sense. Peasants were cowards at heart, that was why they never made anything of themselves. So when it seemed that Espher was faltering, like drowning rats they were fleeing to another ship. Cowards and scum, every one of them, and he’d thought that they might serve some higher purpose like the fool he was. Always looking to see the best in people, and always being disappointed. He would not be fooled again in the same manner.

The crowd had stilled once more, watching Artemio with baited breath, like the hounds before the hunt began. They were not soldiers or warriors, they were common people, armed with little more than knives and what rocks they could scoop from the cavern floor. If he died here, to them, it would not be some glorious annal of history, it would be a joke. He would be a joke. All that he had sought and struggled to achieve would have become a footnote in history, the shortest restoration of a dynastic line in all of time.

“There is only one king, Artemio Volpe.” The turtle woman emerged from the ranks of gather nobodies and faced him down. “And he is not you.”

Like a signal had been sounded, they charged. Artemio had no sword on his hip, for he’d had no way to disguise such a thing, but he did have that which he had been born with. The flickering shadows cast by the torches around his feet doubled in number as a shade came as bidden.

A lance of flame leapt from his one good hand, searing clean through the hardened shell of the turtle woman and boiling her inside of it. Steam and blood burst forth from around her neck, shoulders and hips, but Art had no time to savor his minor victory because the rest of the cult were upon him. Fists raised and fell with a smith’s steady rhythm. Powerful or not, if he did not have a moment to think, he could not direct that power. The forge-spirit’s flame fluttered hopelessly in the palm of his hand.

Then all at once the press of bodies was gone. Kagan stood over him, blood already dripping from his clawed hands. A glance told Artemio the story. Of the ox-man who had tried to accost the unarmed Arazi, thinking that he was more than a match for the strength of any hybrid. Not realizing that Kagan was not bonded to some beast of burden, but a creature of legend. Kagan had seized him, hoisted him, and thrown him.

The crowd that had been beating upon Artemio had been bowled over by the sudden impact of one of their titanic kin, and now Kagan stood over him, clubbing back anyone fool enough to close the distance with his massive fists. “This doesn’t mean I like you.”

“The thought had not crossed my mind.” Artemio mumbled through the taste of his own blood. The room swam as he clambered back to his feet.

“You shall not leave here alive, king of nothing.” It was not the freshly made turtle soup speaking this time, but some other elder who’d likely dissolve to Artemio’s fire just as easily. The trouble was, he had no more fingers that he could afford to sever in exchange for the burst of power it would take to get them free of this trap. Even the brief burst of fire he’d called a



moment before had put a fresh streak of white in his hair. He dared not draw on Harmony for fear of toppling her from dragon-back, so all that he had were the reserve of years left to him, and they were not so many that he wanted to spend them so freely.

Yet when he saw a flash of silver heading for Kagan's ribs, he did. He spent an hour of his own life to preserve the Arazi exile's. The sudden burst of flame setting the hulking man's cloak afire even as it took the would-be-assassin in the face.

"You set me on fire, again?!"

There was no chance to speak, beyond the initial burst of laughter that he was surprised to find escaping him, he had to rely upon the other man's instincts to carry them through this.

With a twist of his wrist he flung out a line of flame, barely thick enough to have done more than hurt, but enough to scare back the press of peasants before they could make a charge at the Arazi's back. With his concentration mostly on holding that line, Artemio took a grip on the back of Kagan's shirt and started hauling him towards the entrance to the cavern.

Compared to the bulk of the man, he must have been barely noticeable. But as Kagan fended off blows with his scaled forearms and punched out at anyone fool enough to remain in his reach, he moved, step by painstaking step, letting the ball of his foot touch down, then rolling the heel down slowly, like he couldn't trust the footing.

Roaring to intimidate his foes, Kagan's first punch seemed to go wide, but as he moved, he tore the burning cloak from his own back and cast it over them, tangling them up and buying himself time to deliver bone-grinding kicks to the smoldering heap of squirming bodies.

Artemio could not keep ineffectually dragging him. Not when enemies were closing in, ducking under the line of flame, jinking around its outer edges to charge in at them. With his bare hand, Artemio had to catch a knife being swung for him, reaching past what had probably once been the prized blade of a hovel somewhere to seize a wrist so skinny he wondered if these peasants weren't so starved, they might all be bowled over with a single swing.

Using his untrained foe's momentum against him, Artemio carried through on his downward swing, throwing his own weight behind it as it passed him by and burying it in the unfortunate man's gut. The expression of surprise on the man's piggy little face would haunt Artemio in the moments to come. The disbelief that any harm could actually come to him. These people were a cult in truth. So devoted to their cause that they overlooked the reality of the situations that they were throwing themselves into.

Kicking that one away, Artemio faced the next, and the next, managing to buy enough time by driving the last attacker at them to summon a blade of flame from his knuckles that he then punched past the assassin's swinging broom-handle to broil his innards. The smell of cooking meat flooded out through the chamber, drawing a rumble from Kagan's stomach where it hung behind Artemio's back.

The bigger man may have had no weapons or any burning desire to preserve Artemio's life, but that did not mean that he didn't fight like a bear backed into a corner. Once or twice the smaller cultists managed to get around his bulk and stab at his flanks, but their little blunt knives were no trouble to Kagan's scales. They deflected off him with a rattle, and for a moment Artemio felt like he could breathe again.

From amidst the gathered foes arose a champion, a great mongrel man with a bull terrier's distinctive sloped head. He pushed his way through the throngs at a charge, hoisting a gardening fork in both hands. Those muddied and rusted prongs would have made it through even Kagan's thick scales if he got in reach, so Artemio had to ensure that he never got in reach.

Fearful as the metalwork might have been, the shaft of the makeshift weapon was nothing but wood. Cheap, easily come by and flammable.

Letting the red line die, Artemio instead focused his summoned flames on the dog-giant's hands. Smoke licked out from where they grasped his tool, but still the bulldog came for them at full pace, trident already descending. The smoldering heat that Artemio had conjured seemed insufficient to dissuade progress, so he fed the flame.

From the scorched woodwork out, fat liquified in the dog-man's arms, bursting out through his crackling skin. He let loose a dread howl that the other canid-mongrels took up, mournfully, as the strongest of them toppled to his knees and then the dusty cavern floor.

The goal was not to kill them all. Artemio did not have enough life left in him for such an undertaking. The purpose of his conquest was instead to frighten them off. To present a version of a shadebound's power that was too dangerous to approach.

Once more, total war was not the requirement. He didn't have to beat all of them, just enough of them that the rest recognized the error of their ways and fled. They didn't even need to flee, if truth be told. Just keep their distance enough that Artemio himself could escape.

Kagan may have been a force to behold on the battlefield, more primal explosion of nature than any sort of disciplined combatant, even he was not possessed of limitless resources. In

places he bled now, where the knives that had glanced from his scales had found purchase in between them. His shirt and trousers slowly darkened as the moisture of his blood spread forth from each of these nicks and scratches.

His furious assault was slowing. It was barely noticeable, and had Artemio's life not depended upon it, he himself likely wouldn't have spotted the more sluggish way that Kagan continued to fight on.

Splitting his attention to keep track on his fighting partner had weakened Artemio's tenuous hold on his magic. The blue hot flames he'd called from his hand now shone red, and instead of slipping through hide and flesh it was buffeting against it more and more often. Sending out smoke and startling the foe but doing nothing beyond that. Half of the mongrels had hides so thick that they wouldn't even notice the burns he was leaving for hours.

"Kagan, we need to go." Artemio had to yell for a hope of being heard over the clash with the rabble, and even with his voice raised he had his doubts as to whether a single word was being heard.

Kagan took hold of the next mongrel to approach him, ducking under a swipe to catch on the woman's thick furred ankles, then he started swinging.

It became Artemio's turn to duck when the Arazi spun, sweeping the unfooted woman in a great spiral up to chest height before letting her go. Like the first bull that Kagan had thrown, everyone could see what was coming, yet nobody seemed to have been expecting it. A whole rank of encroaching revolutionaries were knocked from their feet, toppling the press behind them like dominoes, with only the third set being caught by those pressing in behind them and righted.

"We needed to go before we even got here." Kagan roared over the pained cries of the people he'd just scattered. "Any idiot could see it was an ambush."

Artemio let loose a great wall of flame, paper thin, and barely hot enough to singe hair, but enough to scare men who were barely more than beasts. "It was a calculated gamble."

"You lost."

Leading with his shoulder, Kagan bowled the last few protectors of the entryway aside. He had bulk and strength on his side, and a long lifetime of learning how to best throw it around. If truth be told, he made quite an excellent bodyguard in all aspects but one. He had no loyalty. He would save Artemio for the love of Orsina, but when Orsina's care for Artemio waned, when she was issued commands that she could not stomach or asked for something she did not want to

give. And while Orsina herself was mired in sentiment, it seemed abundantly clear that Kagan was not. If he thought that her needs were best served by Artemio's death, he'd commit himself to it.

As they slipped and sprinted back along the sewerage tunnels, rebels snapping at their heels all the way, Artemio had time when his mind was entirely clear for the first time since he had become king. All of the distractions of rulership set aside. A horse could not wear two bridles, and Espher could not tolerate two kings. He had been lucky thus far, that Orsina had been pliant, but eventually a schism between them would arise.

He may have been a war hero and a king, but much of his reputation had been built upon the back of her labor. If she did break away from him, he could not help but wonder which of them would be left with the greater fraction of the court.

But just as he could not call down the city guard upon the rebels of the Last King's cult, neither could he reveal the secret of Orsina's heredity. He would have been incriminated by both for his foreknowledge of their actions.

Whatever lies he may have spun to Orsina about their engagement, in truth he was simply trying to solidify their base of support into one. Whatever justifications he'd made, he truly needed to make her his wife, for there was no other way to ensure that she would not some day decide that she would prefer to have the crown for herself. She had power enough that there would be nothing he could do to stop her if she did make that decision, so he needed to bind the two of them together so that neither one could strike at the other without suffering the same harm. When the war was won, they would be wed, or he'd have to see her dead, no matter his sister's opinions on the matter.

Besides, how much of the gamble of aristocracy that he'd shown his disdain for to the peasants could be alleviated by a king powerful enough to defend his kingdom alone, without an army or allies. His heirs could be powerhouses to rival the living god of the south.

With a wave of his hand, Artemio sent sparks trailing behind them, igniting the foul-smelling gasses that the sewers extruded. Flames washed over him, over Kagan, over everyone in pursuit, but while it merely singed the backs of those who were being pursued, it seared the faces of those behind them. A blinding, stinging flash that brought their hunt to an abrupt halt.

By the time that their eyes adjusted back to the darkness of the tunnels, the king and his Arazi were gone.

## **12 - The Devil's Bargain** *Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1*

When Orsina and her dragon came back to Covotana, the peasants breathed a sigh of relief. It was not that they didn't trust in their city walls and their noble protectors, but there was comfort to be found in the thought of a champion of limitless power who rode around on a dragon's back that the city guard simply couldn't match.

Beyond the city walls there were more people than could be counted, abandoned wagons with all the worldly possessions of people who had few. Farm animals that had been shepherded across miles of roads milling about aimlessly, but in three times their number, the press of mankind trying to get inside the walls, through the gates to the only safety that they could hope for.

The streets were swollen with the presence of so many people. All the peasants of the southlands who had been driven here by the coming of the Agrantine were milling about, waiting on their ration of bread, what little money they had brought with them long lost. The city may have been large enough to contain them, but there was nowhere for them to go. They looked up at Orsina's return not with the awe and delight of the city's normal residents but with a dead eyed fear. This was not their world, the high walls and ordered streets as alien to them as the great flying beast casting a shadow over them. Orsina could not feel what they felt, but she remembered how it had been, coming to this strange place, where there seemed to be rules for everything, but she knew none of them.

Atop the palace gardens, where Yelena had made her roost, there was an honor guard awaiting her. Two bold knights stepped forward to offer her a hand down from the saddle. Livery boys scampered around unfastening Yelena's harness and scrubbing at her scales with sudsy brushes. And there at the center of a delegation of the most powerful men and women in Espher stood Artemio and Kagan. The former, the very picture of patrician calm, and Kagan grinning like a shark at the sight of her. She rushed forward from among the courtiers trying to attend to her, ignoring the ache in her legs, and flung her arms around the Arazi's waist, as high a hug as she could manage. He chuckled and embraced her back.

In their years together before coming to Covotana, he could not think of any time they'd been so free in showing their affection for one another, but now that their feelings flowed freely

between them, to act as though they did not care for each other would have been foolish, if not impossible. “Welcome home, little one.”

To those gathered nobles, it may have seemed a declaration of loyalty, that the Espheran capitol was now home to the three, dragon, Arazi and shadebound, but through their bond they both knew the truth of his words. She was home because they were together again. They were each other’s home now, wherever life might take them.

Harmony was flanked by the knights that had helped her down from dragon-back, casting jealous looks over to Orsina and Kagan. Though whether it was a jealousy born of her love for the girl, or a jealousy of anyone having such comfort and affection readily on offer was impossible to say. Orsina could not feel what Harmony felt, she only knew what she was told of the world inside her lover.

Artemio should have been that for her. Her brother and her partner through the Impresario bond, but he stood stiff and stern, and the longer that Orsina looked, the more obvious it seemed that the knights stood ready to seize her if she made the wrong move.

As she strode towards Artemio on shaky legs, the knights tensed, but it seemed that she had no ill intentions this time. “Brother, I owe you an apology for my outburst. It was foolish of me, and I hope that you will think of it no more.”

There was a measuring quality to Artemio’s gaze, as though he were trying to decipher the meaning of these words, spoken in some foreign tongue. Then at last he bowed his head, “The fault is mine, dear sister. In all the bedlam I have not made the time to share my plans with you as I should, so it is no small wonder that you are taken by surprise on occasion.”

There was a delicate balance to be struck here, between what they would say to one another in private, and what others would overhear. “I should trust in your good judgement.”

He reached out his hand to Harmony, and Orsina was startled to see bruising across his knuckles. “And I should listen to your good counsel.”

Harmony took his hand gingerly and forced a smile. “So we are friends again?”

“Always and forever the best of friends, dear sister.” He smiled back.

“Then as your friend, I must tell you that now I have returned, I need to sleep for a week.” It drew a chuckle from the gathered nobles. The tension that had hung over the reunion was released.

“Perhaps I might have some report of your success?” He still held her hand, though Orsina felt sure it was hurting him. For Harmony’s part, she looked haggard enough that she might well have been close to death.

Orsina piped up at last, “If it would please my fiancé, I would make that report to him in private.”

Kagan stiffened at the word fiancé, clearly, he had not been informed of Artemio’s plans for her. That was probably for the best. She could only imagine that in his attempts to defend her from whatever wicked plans the king had laid that he would have been brought into conflict with Artemio, and strong though he might have been, he wouldn’t have been enough to kill a king in the seat of his power. She let calm and comfort flow through her into Kagan’s mind. Let him know that there was nothing for him to fear in this new development.

It had brought a dark look to Harmony’s face too, but she was schooled enough to wipe it away before anyone else noticed.

Of all the gathered people on the rooftop, Artemio was the only one who seemed pleased at what she’d said. “That would be delightful, a late breakfast in the solar, perhaps? I cannot imagine you have eaten well on your travels.”

She forced out the kind of tittering laugh that noblewomen of Espher were meant to have. “That is putting it mildly.”

She let herself be led then, flowing along with the servants and the nobles as though they were just another dragon to be ridden, trusting that it would take her to where she was meant to be. Separated from the pack by some maids, she was swiftly hauled out of her clothes, scrubbed down with moistened towels still hot from the fire, and strapped into some fashionable dress that pinched and squeezed her into a shape most unlike her own. Glancing down, as they braided her hair into a more acceptable fashion, she was surprised to discover her bosom on display, pressed tight by the corsetry, but seeming all the larger for how it was being crushed. True, she had not kept much track of how aging rapidly had shaped her body, but she felt certain that if she had acquired these new proportions then she would have noticed at some point.

From there it was back into the flux of the hallways and up spiral stairs to the solar where Artemio sat waiting with a spread of food that made her long ignored stomach begin to grumble. It was entirely possible that she would need to bring one of the maids back in to loosen her dress

if she meant to eat all of it. And she did. She had a dreadful hunger in her now that food was present.

Artemio gestured to the food as grandiosely as he could, and banished the servants with a glance, allowing her free reign to begin stuffing her face without having to maintain a façade of manners. “I am to assume from your return that the quest went well.”

She swallowed down a mouthful of olives and nodded. “Led the dragons straight to him.”

“And they collided as intended?” She could tell that Artemio was on tenterhooks, yet he was politely waiting for her to chew her bread.

She washed it down with a gulp from a glass of watered wine. Grimacing at the taste. “They were still fighting when we left. Only dragons and fliers, none of the wyverns and stuff.”

“I did not truly expect that the bulk of the Arazi forces would be able to pursue you with much haste.” Artemio nodded along. “That division is good news. The riders of the true dragons are the upper caste of Arazi society, the commanders and leaders, without them, the ground troops will have been robbed of much of their efficiency.”

He waited then, letting silence fill the room. Prompting her to speak again. “We met the emperor.”

Artemio wet his lips. “You met him?”

There seemed few things in the world that could knock Artemio off his balance, yet through his façade of calm, Orsina could see how deeply that little tidbit of information had startled him.

Orsina hid her smile behind the glass once more. It was such a rare treat to surprise Artemio that she was relishing it ever so slightly. “He plucked us out of the sky. Offered to marry me. Sent us on our way with a smile.”

“That is... unexpected.” He pushed a plate of pastries across towards her. She had not seen them amongst the variety of platters, but now realised that they were the glazed pine-nut paste filled ones that she had always liked the best. She wondered for a moment if he had memorized what she ate each time they dined together. Filing it all away in the boundless brain of his so that it could be wheeled out again the next time it came in useful. Had he ordered the kitchen staff to make them, just for her? Were they standard fare that he had not touched himself simply because he knew her preference? “I had assumed that if he identified you as Espheran then he would not have engaged in combat with the Arazi. That he would have slain you as an enemy.”



She reached for one of the pastries regardless. They were her favorites regardless of how they'd come to rest on the table. "Well, the Arazi attacked first. Didn't have much of a chance for negotiations."

Now that the initial desperation of hunger had abated, she now practiced at her polite single bites. Placing the pastry back on the little plate in front of her between each one. "We can only hope that their conflict was prolonged and depleted the numbers of both sides."

"Pretty sure the emperor could have killed the dragons all by himself if he'd wanted." That man had frightened her in a way that she had not been scared since laying hands upon Yelena. As though the shade within her sensed something that could match it in power and shied away from the conflict. "I've never met anyone that could do the things he did."

"So the rumors prove true, he is capable of some arcanum with which we are not familiar." Artemio sank back into his seat with a fine line forming between his brows.

"They call him a god." Orsina could feel the hairs on her arms raise as she remembered the touch of the emperor's power. Through Yelena, she had learned how to seize control of the air itself, to shape it and move it to hold and push, yet the emperor had done none of that. His will had been exerted directly upon her body. There was nothing she could fight back against. He wanted something, and it became so. "Is he one?"

Artemio's gaze had slipped out of focus, his mind clearly elsewhere as his mouth moved of its own volition to answer her. "That is a subject of much academic debate."

Chuckling despite the chill creeping up her back, she said, "I'm guessing the Agrantine think he is and everyone else who hasn't seen him in action doesn't?"

"The existence of gods is in itself something of a philosophical debate." He replied, sidestepping the question neatly.

With her pastry finally consumed, Orsina's eyes drifted over the table once more, finally settling upon a silver filigreed bowl containing a rice porridge. It did not fit on the table. It was a peasant's dish, elevated by some fancy spices, no doubt, but still a meal unfit for a king. She could remember the taste of it from when she was just a little girl. One of the few memories from before the forest that still stayed with her. She reached out for it automatically, taking up the whole serving dish and a spoon.

"Whatever he was, he could move things around without touching them, his feelings bled out into everyone around him, and he was completely unfazed by a dragon attack."

Artemio nodded along to each point, filing them away. Slotting them into his worldview, trying to decipher how this combination of abilities might have come together. If this god were some hybridization of the other magical gifts bestowed upon the people of the world or something entirely new. Of all the people in the world, she had hoped that he might have an easy answer for her. That he would whip out some historical tome that broke down all the terrifying power of the emperor into something bite-sized and manageable. Instead he merely sighed. “Then we must assume the worst, and plan accordingly.”

Unbidden, she asked what had been on her mind since the moment the vast mountain of a man garbed in black had plucked her from the sky. “How do you plan to kill a god?”

“It can be done.” Artemio managed to force a smile for her. As though such a vague statement might ease her nerves. “Your time among the Arazi has proven as much.”

There was another lapse into silence as she ate her fill of the porridge then set it aside. She had barely made a dent in it, and the rest would go to waste, she knew. Someone down in the kitchens might have pilfered some of the other finery when it was returned to them untouched, just for the thrill of eating something that their common neighbors would never taste, but something like this that could be found hanging over every hearth in Espher each morning would find its way to the midden. There was enough left to feed a whole family, and it would be thrown away. Artemio was waiting for more. More that he could use. Every snippet that she spoke, another tool that he might use to pry at their problem.

“He’s angry at you.”

That drew a more genuine bemused smile to Artemio’s lips. “I’d assumed as much.”

“He wasn’t angry at Espher, just you.” She felt like that point needed to be made clear. “He’s going to make all of us pay for you killing his wife. Said it was an ‘insult that couldn’t go unanswered.’”

“Not entirely unexpected.” Artemio genuinely seemed unmoved by the thought that a literal god wanted vengeance upon him. She supposed that he must have been used to it by now. “It offered him the perfect pretext for the war of conquest that he has long craved.”

“I don’t think so.” Artemio raised an eyebrow as she spoke. “He said it was a matter of honor.”

“You don’t think so?”

“He seemed... well not upset, but like he didn't have a choice?” She struggled to put what she'd seen into words. The feelings that had been bleeding out of the emperor through their conversation had felt like her own, and there was some deep well of sorrow in the man when he thought of marching on Espher that had nothing to do with the killing that would be done, and everything to do with him feeling as though his hand were being forced.

“He is the sole autarch of his empire, in no danger of losing control over any part of it, worshipped as a god. There can be no internal pressures in the empire driving him.” Artemio picked apart this fresh puzzle one step at a time, as he did all things. It was strangely enlightening to watch the silent process happening in real time instead of merely observing the after effects. “The Agrantine do not have a cultural precept of honor that would force him into conflict with us. Honor, as a concept is aligned with individualism. They are quite the opposite; all individuality is subsumed into the state.”

She thought back to the masked legions that she had seen, every person moving in synchronicity with the one beside them. Like ants all perfectly spaced as they marched along in a line. Even their heroes, their saints, were denied anything that might make them their own person. Every one shaved of their hair and dressed in the same clothing. One person, but part of some vast machine. Everyone the same, made in his image. Feeling what he felt. “One of them is still allowed to be a person.”

Artemio snapped his fingers and grinned at her little contribution. “The emperor himself. And given his presumptive age, he likely predates the loss of honor as a concept from Agrantine society. One rule for everyone else, and another for him.”

“Same as all kings.” Orsina had blurted it out before she could stop herself. She'd like to think it was Rossi's bad influence shining through, but in all honesty, it was not him that she felt like a swelling within her soul, but those old women who guided the revolutionaries. Who had taken her in, despite her being a stranger, and kept her secrets and cared for her the way she'd always longed to be cared for.

There was a smirk on Artemio's face to let her know she had not overstepped too badly. “Were I a king, I might take offense at that.”

She found herself fumbling her words trying to unsay what had already been said. “Sorry Artemio, I wasn't... I know you aren't like that.”

“Historically, more than enough of the rulers of Espher have been, I know.” His smile did not seem forced, but she was not so talented a reader of expressions that she could be sure of that. Within her, the dragon stirred. What did it matter if she offended some man. What was he going to do about it? “I take no offense. And it is my hope that you and all others can see that I hold myself not only to the same standards as those I command, but higher ones.”

Desperately trying to keep the conversation moving along, and away from subjects that would rile the dragon that had been folded into her soul she latched onto the puzzle. “So if it is about honor for him, can’t you just go out and say you’re sorry?”

At last the smile seemed to reach Artemio’s eyes. She had amused him, it seemed. That set all sorts of shades within her prickling with anger, but they were not important now. She tried to keep her focus. To keep them quiet.

“If what you have said of his personal puissance is to be believed, I doubt I would have the opportunity to speak a word were I to present him with so tempting a target, and then Espher would have none to guide her through the conflicts to come.”

She smiled back now, seeing humanity shining through the mask of perfection that Artemio always tried to present. “I’d be scared too.”

Whatever normal human feelings Artemio might have been feeling became hidden behind a wall of inexpression once more. “It is not a matter of fear, but of practicality. I serve my people better alive than dead. I assure you that if the reverse were true then I would gladly make the sacrifice that you describe.”

“You’re the one he wants.” Orsina spoke her thoughts aloud once more, even though they would have been better contained within her skull. “Just like I’m the one Konus wants.”

With a little snort, Artemio asked her, “Would you propose to give yourself over to Konus?”

She could not say which part of her rose up in defiance of his laughter. Whether it was old Mother Vinegar who had stalwartly refused to let anyone look down on her ever, whether it was Rossi, the rebel who would have killed Artemio’s ancestor if he’d been given half a chance, whether it was the dragon that she had slain, who now bayed within her that she was a dragon, mightiest of all living things and master of all she surveyed. In truth, it might very well have been the part of her that was still her, feeling the sting of wrath at the way she and everyone else had been treated through their lives by this man and those like him. The way Konus had treated

her. Regardless, she was startled by her own vehemence. “I would. I would propose that. You go face your enemy; I’ll go face mine.”

Artemio seemed to consider it, as though it were a serious proposal rather than an angry outburst. “Sadly, I will require your presence here in Covotana if we mean to overpower the Agrantine and their living god. As such I would not so easily spend your life.”

“It’s mine to spend, and this is how I’d choose to spend it.” The spark of rebellion in her heart had spread now, taken root, and all was ablaze. “I’ll take the Arazi. You go to the emperor.”

Artemio settled back with a sigh. “It is not that simple; I already proposed such a thing to the Arazi ambassador before you brutalized him. The offer was declined.”

“You haven’t seen him. He isn’t some raving monster. He isn’t like a person at all. He talks like he’s out of a story. So give him the ending he wants, and spare everyone else from getting dragged into the middle of it. Tell him you killed his wife; tell him you didn’t have a choice. Offer yourself up in exchange for Espher. He’ll say yes.”

Artemio had been holding her gaze steadily throughout all of this, but now he glanced down, as though ashamed. “I assure you, he will not.”

He wasn’t listening to what she was telling him. He didn’t understand what the emperor was like. She pressed him. “It’s the perfect ending to the story he thinks he’s the main character of. It’s tidy.”

When Artemio raised his voice, she startled. She could not think of a time when he had not spoken calmly, even in the face of death and destruction. “I will not throw away my life so frivolously on the possibility that in minutes you have correctly assessed a man who has centuries of experience outwitting others. For all that you know all of this was an affectation to convince you that offering me up like some sacrificial lamb was to our advantage! He was in the midst of making a grand display of power at the time, was he not?”

Still shocked by his abrupt vehemence, she did what came naturally to her, and backed down. “He was holding off the dragons.”

“Grandstanding, as I said.” Artemio waved his hand as if he could push the whole debate aside. “It was all manipulation, but you are too unseasoned in statecraft to have identified it so.”

Yet Orsina found that she could not let it go. Her own anger might not have blazed so bright as Artemio’s but it would not be cowed, and nor would she. It didn’t matter if he was the king

and she was a peasant, she was more than just the manner of her birth. She was more than he could even conceive. She would not submit. "I'm not an idiot. I might not have been brought up doing this like you, but I know what I saw with my own eyes."

He dismissed it again. "You saw exactly what he wanted you to see."

It was becoming increasingly apparent that there was no point in pursuing this line of conversation further, but she still could not let go of her irritation. "Did I mention that he wanted to marry me? Thought I was fascinating. Proposed on the spot."

"What a shame that we are already betrothed, or you could have joined with our worst enemy and lived a life of comfort atop Espher's grave." Artemio's sneer would remain seared into Orsina's memory. The contempt that he felt for her in that moment like a knife to her heart.

"I would never do that. I'm not... wicked." She couldn't believe that she was even having to say this. "I'm just saying that at least he actually proposed."

There was a bitterness to Artemio's laugh. "Would you have me down on one knee before you, pledging my undying love? We both know that the wedding between us would be a matter of political expediency and nothing more."

Always, Orsina had sought the truth from Artemio, even when he had not been willing to give it, but now she wished that she could give it back to him, lock it away and never look at it again. He knew nothing of love. Nothing of even companionship. It was small wonder that his views on marriage were so bleak. To her surprise, Orsina began to feel pity for him, until some oddness in the phrasing of his last dismissive snipe caught her attention.

"I thought that you were going to call it off."

She did not catch a guilty expression on his face, because he was carefully schooling his features. Yet new to all of this as she was, she recognized now that when Artemio showed no expression it was because he knew that revealing his thoughts on his face would serve only to defeat his purposes. If he wasn't showing anything, it was because he was hiding something. She had caught him out. He actually did mean to marry her. Despite all his promises to her and Harmony, he truly meant for her to be his bride. His queen.

"I merely meant that there is no love between us." He tried to backpedal his previous words and overshot into something entirely offensive before proceeding to try and reel that back too. "Beyond that of friends."

“Then as your friend, please believe me. You should go out and face him.” Orsina held his gaze steadily. Let him see that there was no malice or confusion in her thoughts and words. If she could just get him to listen. “Think how good it would look for the common people and nobles, if you were willing to do that. To risk yourself instead of asking them to die for you.”

“My appearance would matter little, unless you were attempting to capture a likeness for a statue to set upon the tomb where I would henceforth dwell.”

“I’ll come with you.” She offered. “I’ll talk to him. This doesn’t have to end in fighting.”

He deflated just a little, sinking down into his chair with a great sigh. He stay sunk there for but a moment as he composed himself, then he leaned forward to hang over their breakfast once more.

“I am going to explain something to you once, and once only. For kings, there is only war, and diplomacy which is the prelude to war. For in the heart of every man their beats a war drum, and in the mind of every man there lives a tyrant, and if a man is made king then he must heed them both or risk ruin. Every time that he thinks the best of someone, he bleeds for it. Every time he trusts in the word of another, he bleeds for it. Every time that he thinks that this time mankind will prove his compassion worthy, he bleeds.” There was a raggedness to Artemio’s words as he made this speech. As though they pained him to speak as much as they pained her to hear. “So please, understand that every time that someone oh so valiantly declares that war is not the answer, I must question who puppeteers them to discover who wants me to be unprepared for the war to come. War is the natural state of all things. We are born, we fight every moment for our lives, and when we fail, we die.”

For a moment, Orsina could not even speak, then finally she found the question she needed to ask. “That is the bleakest thing I have ever heard. You trust nobody?”

“Who is there to trust? Who around me has Espher’s best interests at heart?” There was a crack in his voice that made Orsina wonder if his war-wound was giving him pain. “Harmony has eyes only for you and thinks only of your comfort. You care only for your own sense of righteousness. Granchio claims to be loyal, but I can already see her amassing power to herself between the lines of the reports she delivers to me. All of the world is a traitor, and I... I am the king. Whether I want to be or not, this is my burden to bear. When the decisions between life and death must be made, I am the one to make them.”

She shook her head slowly, involuntarily. All of the food laid out before her seemed tasteless now. What she had already eaten lay in her gut like a stone in a sack. “I don’t understand how you can get out of bed every morning if you think like that.”

With another great sigh, Artemio covered his face and rubbed at his temples. “Because despite my torments, I am filled with purpose. Espher will survive, and I will make her survive whether she is willing or no. Regardless of the blood I have to spill and the trusts I have to break, I will save Espher from all of her enemies, within and without.”

Orsina wanted to comfort him. To wrap her arms around this poor lost boy who had somehow found himself planted on a throne, but she could not. There were dishes between them, and a fence of etiquette all around them. She could not hug a king, and even if she were allowed to, she knew that Artemio would not appreciate it at all. To accept comfort would be to admit weakness, to his way of thinking, and he could never do that. Not even behind closed doors with his most trusted allies. “It sounds more like you’ve been overcome by paranoia.”

“To rule is to expect the worst, to look for the connections where others cannot see them. Do you know how I rooted out half the traitors in court? Their grain purchases. Those who received money from the Agrantine invested it in grain, knowing that war was coming, and it would be at a premium with the fields lying fallow. I have seized half the granary stock we now hold in Covotana against coming siege from their estates, and do you know what I found growing in their fields where grain should have been were it not purchased from abroad? Grapes. They meant to make wine while our kingdom was laid to waste.” If he were anyone else in the world, Orsina would have said that Artemio was on the verge of tears as he spoke, but it could not be so.

“I am not your enemy, Artemio.”

He met her gaze with dry eyes. “Nor would I ever wish for you to be.”

“Your sister isn’t your enemy either.”

With a heavy sigh he tore his stare from her once more. It was clear that he had been expecting this conversation, but that did not mean that he wanted to have it. “My sister... is her own worst enemy. As I am aligned with her, I often find myself conflicting with her worse impulses as they are brought to bear.”

“You locked her up.”

He cut off any attempt at indignation with something like a hiss. “She attacked the king. Anyone else would have been quartered.”



“She’s your sister.” Orsina felt her stomach turn. Was Artemio so lost to his own self-aggrandizement that he no longer cared where he was from, or who had been with him from the beginning.

He let his head slump down into his hand once more. Massaging gently at his temples as hair spilled forward. The practical ponytail that he had worn as a nobleman had given way to his hair being worn loose and allegedly regal. Combined with the newfound stiffness of his movements as his missing hand pained him. Orsina sometimes felt like he’d become a different person entirely from the one she’d known. When he spoke, it was soft enough that she had to strain to hear it. Quiet enough that the listeners outside of his door could not parse his words. “Being my sister does not preclude her from making mistakes. I felt that confinement would limit the scope of those mistakes until her temper had settled.”

It was bizarre. He had known Harmony for his whole life, yet he didn’t understand how her mind worked in the slightest. It was as though she were a blind spot in his otherwise excellent knowledge of people.

Unable to let that pass, she had to ask the obvious. “You didn’t think that it might make her angrier?”

Pushing back his hair, he sat back up straight and dismissed the thought with a flick of the wrist. “Harmony has always been swift to anger and swift to forgive, I knew that she only needed time.”

Orsina did not know how to ask for things. It had not been one of the etiquette lessons conveyed to her by tutor, who was so accustomed to the world of nobility where demands were the norm that it did not occur to her that it might be needed. In the forest, Orsina had not asked, she had been told, and she had accepted whatever was given to her as her lot in life. In the House of Seven Shadows, all was provided for students needs and such abundance had never left Orsina to consider her wants. She was entirely outside of her comfort zone and not one of the parasitic shades woven through her soul was any better at asking for what they wanted. “I would appreciate it if you did not jail my... Harmony again without consulting me.”

He seemed to weigh the clumsy request with all seriousness, and it seemed to Orsina that he might actually be amenable to reason or restraint. Then he spoke. “And you will make the painful decision for me? I think not. No matter how far the burden of making choices may roam before it arrives, here is where it ends. Now and always. That is the price of being king.”

If for just a single moment he could stop being a pompous ass then Orsina felt sure she could tamp down her shades mounting anger, but it seemed that was asking too much of him. “Would trusting me kill you?”

Mirth had no place in the laugh he let out. It was as bitter as the most brackish of water, and twice as chill. “It very well might.”

Without meaning to, she adopted his mannerisms, covering her face with a hand while she tried to get her emotions back under control. Through near gritted teeth she eventually managed to say, “I’m not trying to trick you or hurt you.”

“You are not, but that doesn’t mean that others cannot work through you to do great harm.”

That chilled her temper despite the way he spoke to her as if she were a child. He knew. He knew that there was something wrong with her. With her magic. He could tell somehow that the shades were no longer bound as they should have been.

In truth it was almost a relief to finally have somebody she could talk to about it. Harmony would have descended into a spiral of panic, Kagan would not have understood at all. Yelena would have told her something about freedom being the natural state of all things. Only another Shadebound might have the answers she needed, and only Artemio knew the fullness of her story. “My shades?”

“My sister.” He knew nothing. All of her hopes were dashed. She knew that she could not expose herself if she did not have to. He didn’t know, so she would not tell him. “The emperor. The Arazi. Any number of lesser rivalries in the court that would seek to swallow you into their conspiracies. You are an important member of my court. The most important beyond myself, if truth be told. Yet lacking in the cultural education that would render you immune to manipulation. And that means that you are a vulnerability that others will attempt to exploit to gain control over me and you both.”

From the pit of disappointment her fury flared back to life. Echoed back and forth within her by the fractured mirror of her psyche and the shades woven to hold it all together. Every one of them was angry, at having their life snatched away, at the world that they found themselves dwelling in, at her, their jailor and the only reason they could persist and grow strong most of all. She snapped at him. “I’m not blind and I’m not stupid, and I’d appreciate it if you’d stop treating me like I was.”

He clearly could not tell how deeply her resentment had begun to cut. “Act with wisdom and your treatment will be amended accordingly.”

“And wisdom looks like blind obedience to you?” She said with an imperious sneer that she hadn’t thought herself capable of.

He tutted at her. Actually tutted, as though he were some tutor and her failing his testing. “Wisdom looks like heeding the words of those who know better.”

The dragon flared to life within her, filling her veins and mind with flame. It could not stand to be condescended to. It could not abide to be treated this way. It spoke with her voice. “You think you’re better than me?”

Artemio seemed bemused by the question. As if she were asking something so foolish that he couldn’t believe she’d embarrass herself by voicing the question. “I would never suggest such a thing. Though it is implied by my station.”

“They were right about you.” The words came unbidden once more as her memories, contorted and racked by the things that she had endured came flooding back. The warnings Kagan had given about kings. The spark of rebellion that Gatto had stoked within her. The words of those old peasant women who had fled across the world in search of a god to protect them from men like this. “I can’t believe that I couldn’t see it before.”

His scoffing vanished in an instant and his answer was sharp. “Might I have the name of my detractors?”

“So you can have them executed?” She snarled, rising from her seat. Manners and meal be damned. “I don’t think so.”

He looked up at her looming over him, shadows flickering into being all around her, and his shoulders slumped. “What do you want from me, Orsina?”

It was enough to shock her out of her mounting rage. “What?”

“You come to me with demands that I offer up my life as recompense for the grave sin of defending my home against an invader, and now you pick fights over nothing. What is it that you are agitating for? What do you want?”

She did not spit, because she had been too well trained in the manners of court to even bring herself to do so, but she certainly spat out her words. “Is honesty too much to expect?”

“Yes.” He answered simply, with a calm entirely unbecoming his situation, locked alone in the Solar with a shadebound powerful enough to tear his kingdom down. “Every word that I say to

you, you might repeat to a dozen others. My battleplans may fall into enemy hands rendering them useless. Not to mention that with each new piece of information that I acquire, the very nature of my schemes must be remade. All is in flux, yet when a change comes I am accused of deception for failure to have seen the future. I tell you what I can, when I can, when you need to know it.”

She had never wanted anything. Not for herself. She’d relished in the love that Harmony showed her after a lifetime devoid of affection. She’d strived to do the best that she could in all things, because through excellence she might survive, but she had never wanted the power that came with it, nor the violence that power demanded she unleash to protect herself as she became more and more the focus of attention. In all that she had endured, it had not once occurred to her to wonder what it was that she actually wanted when all the fighting and struggle was done. She had no idea of what world she would want to live in, even though she had been granted the power to make it a reality.

She wanted nothing for herself, but for others, she wanted everything. “I need to know how you mean to protect the people. Not Espher, not the nobles, the real people who are out in the streets, outside the walls, bereft of their homes by your schemes and wars.”

Artemio blinked in surprise, taken off guard. “Their situation is unfortunate, but temporary. When the war is over, they can return to their farms and villages. For now, those inside may partake of the same ration all citizens receive.”

“That isn’t enough.” Gatto’s drawling accent bled into her voice. “They are dying. They are suffering.”

“Unless you, in all of your power, can conjure new homes for them, then they will remain so. This is a war, there will be casualties. You must accept that.” He shrugged.

“I don’t.” She cut off his contemptuous surety with but a word. All of this time, he had been using her to his own ends. Now the horse that he had ridden to victory was set to buck him. “You want to know what I want Artemio? I want you to treat them like people instead of pawns in your game. I want you to care about them.”

She could see the tiniest of movements across his face as his emotions washed over it and he slammed the door shut on all honesty and humanity. “Then you ask for the impossible. If I were to shed a tear for every person that my choices hurt, then all of Espher would be flooded. I do what I must, not what pleases them.”

It was time to put her money where her mouth was. “Then I won’t fight for you.”

His mouth fell open for an instant before his placid, expressionless mask was slammed back into place. “I beg your pardon?”

“I’m your weapon, right? Well I refuse to be drawn.” She forced herself to stand still though her body longed to move. She picked up her wine and sipped from it. As if this were all normal. She made a show of being the same as him, implacable in the face of whatever adversity was being discussed. “Until you show me that you give a damn about the people, until you make sure that they are cared for, I will not go to war for you.”

Once more, he laughed at her. “You expect me to believe that you, with your bleeding heart weeping over every peasant’s stubbed toe will sit back and watch as war comes to Espher? That you will let dragons burn the city down?”

Alone, she could not have done it. She would have heard the first crying child and taken flight. But she was not alone anymore. She was never alone. And those that dwelled within her heart now were more than capable of coldness. “If that is what I must do to remind you that you have a heart, yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

She took a shuddering breath. “As you said before, Artemio. We are friends. And for my part at least, that means I speak honestly with you. Until you prove to me that you’re not the tyrant you are behaving like... I won’t fight.”

His eyes narrowed as she walked away from him. She was sure turning her back on him was some awful insult, but maybe he needed a little insulting after being surrounded all the time by sycophants who’d obey his every whim to bring him back to the person she’d felt so sure that he was. “Perhaps you need to share a cell with Harmony until your truth is better aligned with mine.”

It was her turn to laugh. And with that exhalation, every candle in the room blew out and the glass panels of the solar’s roof frosted over white. “As if any prison built by human hands could hold me.”

When she left then, he made no move to stop her. Because as they both knew, nothing could.