

**The Red Masque**  
***Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

A rat could see in the dark perfectly, but the Volpe twins could not, so it fell to Artemio to conjure a flame. It was harder to hold that tiny flicker of light than it would have been to flood the entire tunnel with flames. Everything about him cried out for fire, and the Forge-Spirit longed to burn it all.

These once had been pyroducts, like so many of the tunnels beneath Covotana. Lava tunnels stretching up and out from the great volcano that had formed the caldera that was now the city's outer wall. Now they were walled up behind the offcuts of the white stone that had made the city above. The original slick surface of the molten stone was disguised behind the white, and the white in turn had been disguised by centuries of effluence, mould and moss. Gasses rose from the sewage trickling along the bottom quarter of the tunnel, puffing the tiny spark of flame into a green cloud for an instant before Artemio could bring it back under control. He found himself wishing that he'd taken the lantern along now that the rat had been removed from it, but they certainly weren't backtracking now.

Here and there he saw the rat-maid's eyes dart, and he tried to observe as she did. A spot where the moss had fallen away. A chipped bit of stone in the arch above. Natural landmarks of the sewers, or deliberately marked signs? He could not tell, and for all of his talents at deduction, there was simply too much unknown down here for him to make any sense of it all. Too much was in flux, down here in the filth, and he found his senses overwhelmed, by the stench, the sounds and the strain of keeping the fire at bay. He knew that Harmony would be doing much the same as him, observing all she could, but her attentions were forever pointed forward. Her interest was in the future, what was coming next, what would happen next, how she could intercept danger before it struck, she never thought on the past, and how things had come to be how they were. He supposed that between the two of them, they almost managed wisdom. Almost.

The rat-maid's foot slipped, and he seized her about the waist before she could splash into the filth flowing alongside them. She tremored in his grip, just as the real rat had, and she tugged herself away with more than due force. Had that been a deliberate attempt to make a noise? Was she trying to announce them to some potential ambushers? Every moment more questions arose, but beneath them all was the burning one. Who was the Last King? Who had seized this mantle from myth and made themselves a master to assassins? Despite all threats, the rat-maid had given no answers, claiming ignorance, and Artemio felt quite certain she'd have given up her own mother rather than risk her bond-mate's safety again.

He could not imagine a world in which you might give yourself over body and soul to someone in a mask without even a hint as to their identity, but he supposed that things were different for peasants. They did not have the education required to make wise decisions, and it was in their nature to follow. One flag likely seemed as good as any other to them. At least it provided a neat solution to the problem if this one servant was to be believed. If there was no cabal behind all of this, and only a single leader, the snake could be decapitated in a single blow.

Artemio had never made much study of sneaking, he knew that, given his upbringing, it should have been second nature to him to creep about as if he were a spider stalking prey, but he had learned early

that any behaviour like that was unbecoming of a gentleman, and could earn him a strapping independently of the one he'd receive for whatever he'd actually been up to. So when he had gone about what his mother had called wickedness and he had called trying to live, he had always done so with his head up and shoulders back.

So it was but a few minutes along those dim-lit sewer tunnels that Harmony had to dart forward and catch him before a crumbling brick dropped him into what could be charitably described as water, with a splash that would have roused the dead. "Steady now," She whispered in his ear, "You should not have started on the celebratory wine until we were done."

He pushed away from her, fumbling to keep the spark of flame under control, flaring it bigger as it threatened to die and dazzling himself, crushing it back down so abruptly that the three of them were suddenly in blind dark. He had to squeeze his eyes shut against the darkness and light to find the stability required to bring everything back into balance. Then he looked about him.

The rat-maid was gone.

"Shit." Perhaps that outburst was not gentlemanly, but it was entirely necessary.

They took off at a run down the tunnel, capering and slipping in the filth and slime underfoot, all hope of stealth abandoned in the face of the far greater danger of the maid passing on some warning to her masters.

The slop of sewage and the slap of their feet on the wet stone echoed all around them, deafening them to any other sounds. Artemio sent his fire darting along ahead of them, letting it splash and rebound off the wall, popping and bursting out larger and louder with each patch of gas that it struck until it was scorching the roof and bubbling the waters below.

Another necessary sacrifice, to create enough light to pick out the rat-maid's course as she twisted and turned through these tunnels, a smudge of elongated heel here, in some slime. A little moss dangling loose here, at the level of her eye, where her clawed fingers would have pried it free. At a branch he almost ran on in pursuit of his flame before catching sight of another rat, haring its way out of the other tunnel towards them. Disturbed with a chicken bone still dangling from its mouth. There. He made the leap half-cocked and his heels touched the vile water before he could scabble himself back into motion.

Every delay gave the rat-mongrel more distance. If this had all been a ruse to get free of them, then that mattered little, but if she'd spoken truly and there was some meeting down in the sewers, every moment she was free brought the whole enterprise closer to its crashing annihilation, and both the Volpe twins with it.

A left turn, a right. Clawed marks on the wall where her toes had scraped and she'd hauled herself up into a crossing drain. Harmony's feet beat a steady rhythm behind him, he was gasping in the foetid air and she likely hadn't broken a sweat.

At the end of the raised interceptor the tunnel opened out into a stormwater drain, deep as a well and wide as a village square. Harmony caught him before he could go over, but his mind still reeled even as his feet found their place back beneath his shoulders. All of this was beneath the city and he had never even the faintest idea. Miles and miles of tunnels that led throughout the place, hidden by their own mundanity. He had never once thought where the toilets of the city flowed, or given it a second thought

if he had. Just as he had never wondered how the servants in the palace managed to get around in all of their hundreds without a noble being forced to lay eyes upon them. Everything had been in plain sight from the very beginning, but he was simply too blind to see it.

There was a ledge around the vertical shaft, wide enough for a man to walk along it unhindered, were it not so clogged with flotsam fallen from above. As it was they had to edge their way around and hope that the wet handprint that Artemio had glimpsed shimmering back from the right angle tunnel to the one that they entered was new and not some quirk of the environment making damp patches persist long beyond they were due to.

Looking down was obviously unthinkable, so as he nudged dead pigeons and rotten leaves aside, Artemio pondered how little it would have taken to make servants take up arms against their masters. He could not help but think of his own family as the prime example. Most of those in his father's service had been with the family through generations, as much a part of the family as any trueborn heirs. Or so his father would have said. He could not picture his nurse turning on mother with a blade in hand. The old liver-spotted castellan closing his spidery fingers around her throat. It was as inconceivable as a pig chopping up its butcher, yet the evidence all said that it was so.

When he arrived, the handprint was unmistakably elongated into something between rat and human. They were going the right way.

The slapping of their feet began to be drowned out in the flow of water as they joined larger and larger pipes and tunnels, until there was a veritable flood of what looked to be clean water running in an underground river alongside them. Spray rose up off it, masking the rest of the tunnel with a mist, blinding Artemio to the course that their quarry had taken, making the already slippery stone lethally slick. They had no choice but to carry on as best they could until abruptly the torrential waters stilled. Passing from river to a great basin in a few paces. Beneath their feet they found battered wooden boards, and between them, the great currents of the underwater river spun the oil clinging to the surface through a vast and complex dance, shimmering back the light of Artemio's tiny flame and the more proper torches that they could see glowing beyond the walkway.

More of the same rickety construction had been undertaken on the distant shore, a stage raised up between still lake and a baying crowd, all garbed in the same rough rag hoods that the assassins had worn when they came for Artemio mere hours ago. Hundreds were gathered here and these could be only a fraction of the full army that this insurrection had gathered. In every noble household there could be one or more of these killers, and beyond them in the fields that were tilled, and the towns that were protected by the will and wealth of their betters there could be nests of vipers such as these under every unturned stone. So many of them that it beggared comprehension.

Artemio reached back, and found his sister's hand already outstretched. This was larger than either one of them could have known, and infinitely more dangerous. The rat-maid had already vanished into the crowd. She could already have been spreading the word of their coming. Setting the meeting to scatter, or preparing an ambush for when they emerged. Surprise remained the only thing on their time in this foreign land beneath the soil, and Artemio would not sacrifice it on the altar of his own mortal fear. He strode forward, leading Harmony on. "What exactly do you mean to do?"

“Grab a rag, cover our heads, get in close, take their leader hostage.” She walked in his shadow, eyes wide as he let their own torch die. All eyes seemed to be directed to the stage, but wandering through with a dancing magical flame seemed a fairly clear invite to unwanted attention. Not to mention, splitting his attention in a situation like this was a good way to cut his life short.

There was chatter all about them, subdued, but enough that their own words did not leap from the crowd. Harmony hissed into his ear. “This is the cunning for which the Volpe are famed?”

They pushed into the rear ranks of the crowd, and with swift hands and a distinct lack of care for the property of others, Harmony was able to furnish them with some truly wretched looking shawls that they draped about themselves in a vague facsimile of a disguise. It wasn't much, but they didn't need much. The swarm of bodies about them was a mixture of everyone who dwelled within Espher's borders. All tones of skin, feathers and fur alike. Artemio barely contained a hiss of disgust. Whoever was in charge of this mess must truly have been desperate to invite mongrels to take an equal standing within the organisation as everyone else. It was not that he had any bias against them, simply that they were unsightly, and a sure sign that the bottom of the barrel was truly being scraped, given how powerless such creatures had ever been, historically.

“I haven't exactly got all evening to come up with something better.” He grumbled back. “It will work. We can unmask him, use him as a shield. We have options here.”

They were stopped behind a rather bulky shrouded figure, most likely one of the few dockworker mongrels that had bonded to the turtles found in those murky waters. The twins parted and reformed on the other side of him. “Or her.”

It was enough to give Artemio pause. “What?”

“Who's to say the Last King isn't a woman.” He couldn't see Harmony's face beneath her hood, but there was a familiar set in her shoulders. One of contrariness. As though simply arguing enough might remove her from the uncomfortable situation she was in.

“I... I mean...” He let out an exasperated huff. “Is this really the time?”

She glanced around as faces began to turn their way, then fell into step beside him once more. “Right, yes. Later.”

The crowd grew denser still as they came closer to the stage. It seemed huge now that they were on the plane below it, what had been rickety woodwork from a distance transforming in the upcast torchlight into something vast and looming. Whoever had built this had done so with an eye for drama. “Or never, that would also be quite acceptable.”

It was with the same theatrical flourish that the Last King came into sight, lunging up from a ladder on the waterside. From down here on the ground he seemed as tall as a giant, though Artemio did some swift calculations that put him at a little over average height. He was robed in rags, the same as all of the others, a mask that could be cast aside, a crowd into which he could easily blend. The only thing that made him distinct from any of the other peasants down here in his shadow was the crown upon his head. Finery would doubtless have made for a more dramatic effect, but the myths had always been clear that the Last King was not a creature of gold, but of decay. Atop his hooded head lay a circlet of

woven hawthorn, and Artemio was willing to bet that it was not droplets of water from the lake dripping down from it to patter upon the stage, but the blood of whoever had been forced to weave it.

The crowd went berserk. They flung themselves forward. Their voices rising beyond human sounds into a monstrous ecstasy. Drowning out the water, the conversation, everything that had made this strange unhallowed place beneath the earth in any way comforting. The mongrels made their bestial calls, but the purebred human stock seemed intent on showing them up with their own wailing and roaring. Artemio saw a mousy looking woman to his right throwing back her head and screeching to the cavern's top. And it was a cavern now that he looked. Not another part of the sewers, but a bubble in the volcanic rock that stood as the capitol's foundation. It must have been here since before the city was built, unknown to anyone on the surface. Anyone except for these deranged lunatics, or the one who led them.

The King held his arms wide until silence fell. For a crowd so lost to their passions, it happened so abruptly that for a moment Artemio felt as though all the air had left the chamber. He glanced to Harmony and saw his own mounting fear reflected back from her eyes. If this crowd were turned on them, shades and blades wouldn't matter a damn, the swarm would tear them apart bare handed.

"Our enemies are weak. They are weak, and they are blind. Beneath their noses we have seized the throne of Espher. We have taken their power, and at last, it shall be returned to where it belongs..." The Last King was a skilled orator for being an immortal shade of death and destruction, almost as though he'd had lessons in it. His voice was not muffled by a mask as Artemio had expected, but rather it echoed and rebounded out, as though some cone were fashioned beneath that dangling hood to amplify every word. "It shall be returned to those who made Espher great, those who sweat and toil while the bloodless necromancers and their lackies lounge."

The rhetoric didn't seem to be going anywhere. It was the usual small minded drivel about the people of Espher being too reliant upon the magic of the Shadebound that all of her enemies bandied about. Artemio could barely believe that all of these locally grown men and women were giving it any credence. Admittedly, they would not have been trained in rhetoric and logic, but to see them so easily led along by some foreign agent was disheartening. Still the King boomed on. "The power belongs in our hands, in your hands. We are the ones who build the streets, grow the food, do all of those things that a nation actually needs to survive. We are the ones who should govern it."

Harmony let out a huff that drew Artemio's gaze and he realised with dismay it was a laugh. She was the very picture of contempt. Everything that this peasant speaker was claiming that they were. If he had heard her laugh, as to would all those around them, he caught her sleeve and dragged her close. "Sister dearest, now is not the time to express yourself."

"Art, it is drivel." She hissed. "These people can't rule. They wouldn't know the first thing about..."

His eyes darted about as he tried to master his fear. Heads were turning their way. Even with the King there before them, holding all attention with his rambling. "We can discuss this matter later."

Throughout their soft spoken bickering the titan looming over them all had carried on. "... and this is how we know that there is only one king who cannot be made into dirt and bones, and his name is death. No gods, no kings. No more parasites lodged like ticks upon her majesty. Only Espher, eternal!"

The crowd took up the cry, echoing it back to him. "Espher, eternal!"

If the sound they'd been making had drawn attention before, their silence now boomed. When the closest of the hooded ones realised that Artemio and Harmony hadn't shouted out about how marvellous the country they were currently attempting to entirely undermine was, they spun on him, hand fumbling at their belt for a weapon. Artemio didn't give them the chance. Stepping in close he drove a fist into the guts of whatever creature the mildewed cloth concealed, folding them. There was one glorious instant where he thought it had worked. That he'd downed them without attention being caught, but up there, dangling from the side of the stage, he met the eyes of the rat-maid where she hung. "Enemies! Enemies among us! Treachers! Parasites! Necromancers!"

Her words spread like a ripple through the crowd. Every head turning their way. All around them bristling. The King on stage fell silent, pointing with a single finger at Artemio where he stood. "Slay them!"

Everything that could possibly have gone wrong, now had, and the time for restraint was long behind them. Now was the time for Harmony's kind of diplomacy.

Artemio drew his rapier with a flick of his thumb, and with only a backward glance to watch its course, Harmony's hand darted out to catch it by the handle, even as she drew her own.

Without a combat shade, he was no match for her talents with the blade, and as helpful as Bisnonno Fiore had been in that regard, this was not a situation any king might have prepared for.

What luck that Artemio's talents lay elsewhere.

Flinging his arms apart, he let the fire burn. All of this time, he had been holding the forge-spirit at bay. Letting out little sparks and flickers. It did not want to be a candle-light in the darkness or a torturer's flame or a line of flame parting a crowd or a lance of fire chasing back along a thread of will to an upstart at a party. It wanted to be an inferno.

So just this once, he let it.

Flames leapt out from his outstretched fingers, not in careful darts or angular streams but in a torrent, a wave of fire that washed through the crowd, never staying still long enough to eat through to flesh, but never stopping either. The greasy rags that they'd garbed themselves in caught alight, their disguises began to burn away. None of this mattered much to the gathered peasants when they could feel flame licking at them through their clothes.

Even the most refined gentleman became an animal when fire was upon them, and these were not refined gentlemen. They dropped to the ground, rolling and screaming and Artemio launched himself forward, stamping on them as he leapt forward, stumbling on towards the stage, towards victory.

Behind him he could hear Harmony doing her delicate dance, the slice and thrum of her blades as they flowed from step to step. He did not need to look back to know that she had cast off her burning shroud or that she was cutting down any would-be killer still holding their ground. Such was their trust.

More and more of his life trickled away, fuel for the ever spreading flame, but what were a few more minutes of his life cut short in the face of a prize such as this. Fiore knew. He knew what this victory would be worth. He spent himself without recompense, invisible hands on Artemio, driving him on,

lifting him up, catching him as he stumbled. A great turtle mongrel fell to his knees screeching before the stage, and Artemio saw his opportunity. The arch of his leap overlaid the scene, and his grandfather's hands pressed up beneath his heels to launch him forward.

With one leap he mounted the shell on the mongrel's back, driving the lumbering giant down onto her face, then he kicked off in a plume of flame and icy winds, flying up onto the driftwood stage and the Last King who awaited him there.

Say what you would of this rebel, but there could be no denying his composure. Though the stage burned, and his ragged robes with them, he did not flinch. Even as Artemio came on with flames coiling around his fists, he stood his ground.

It was time to end this. It was just a matter of time before weight of numbers overcame the momentary advantage that surprise had bought them. There was no chance of taking a prisoner and escaping in one piece. There was only now. There was only this moment. Artemio flung both arms forward and the fire leapt at the Last King. Not the wild chaos he'd sowed below, but two perfect lances of boiling blue flame.

They stopped dead a foot from the Last King. Strangled away to nothing.

Artemio's charge faltered. The surety and power he'd known but a moment before crumbling in the face of this impossible sight. His feet felt leaden at all the life he'd spent. His mind sluggish as adrenaline fled. "How?"

The Last King crossed his arms across his chest and said nothing at all. Once more Artemio reached for his shades, to try again, to try something new, but the tide had turned and his chance was burnt.

The rat-maid had finished her scramble up onto the stage, but that didn't exactly fill him with trepidation. Even if they had some way to quash his Shadebound powers, Artemio felt certain a chambermaid with delusions of grandeur was still well within his capabilities. Rather it was the rest that troubled him. A dozen more of the unmasked assassins now took the stage and every one of them must have known what would happen to them if he survived. There was no plausible deniability for them now, if he returned to the surface, they'd die.

And they had knives, while Artemio's hands were empty.

In desperation, Artemio lanced out fire at the closest of them and was delighted to find that whatever protection the King bore did not extend to his minions. The dart of fire took the top off a fishmonger's head, leaving a blackened channel where face and skull had once been.

On came the rest, unheeding of the danger, intent on bearing him down, and again Artemio lashed out, a whip-line of flame to drive them back, to give him space. It lapped over the closest of them, searing through their upraised arms, blackening to bones and sizzling away hybrid's hair, but at the far end of the stage where the King still stood stalwart it sputtered and died.

Was the King Shadebound? Was he truly a shade, dressed in mortal robing to disguise himself and pass freely among them? Such thoughts should have been preposterous, but faced with this evidence, Artemio could not think of any other way his own powers might have been subverted. He had never

heard of a foreign magic that could stop Espher's shades. Nor any device or design beyond a shade in tow that could put an end to an elemental's assault.

He cast out his senses as the peasants gathered their wits. Prying at the King, trying to find the tell-tale signs of a shade at work, but there was nothing. Bisnonno Fiore, the Forge-Spirit and an empty echo where any opposition should have been.

On came the knives and blind fervour. The burnt beasts barely feigning humanity. Artemio struck at them, whipping them across their upraised arms and faces, hoping to drive them back without more murder, but it was not to be.

His hands shook as the life left him. As the precious moments of his years were burnt away in the fulcrum of his shades and became flames in truth his skin grew looser, the brightness of the flames dimmed, the world faded towards oblivion. He was spending too much too swiftly.

He could barely hear himself think as he bellowed out, "Harmony?!"

From up here he could not see her, he did not know if she had fought her way through, or if she was already dead. There was no time.

The nearest of the peasants came on, jagged knife sweeping for his throat. They were only human, only as strong and fast as a man could be, they were not his match. Artemio dragged the flames back under his control as he fell back, made a blade of them and slashed clean through the charred and blackened rags this man had worn when he lived.

It flared blue hot as it struck through bone, then it was gone and he was stumbling back towards the back of the stage and the dead drop into the water.

"Harmony!" He tried again, desperation creeping up his throat. He could not flee without her. He would not.

A horse-headed mongrel lumbered in with a stave in hands. Clad in either end with battered copper. Some peasant's tool Artemio did not know. The mule spun it overhead then brought it down on him.

Flames licked along the length of the staff, lapping harmlessly over the copper, but biting deep through the bound leather and into the wood. It struck him hard on the top of the head, and for an awful instant everything fell silent and dark, but then the staff snapped in two parts from the damage and the pressure.

He caught the scalding half that had been meant to spill his brains and drove it forward, wreathed in more fire, right into the horse-man's guts. The great lout folded around the blow and another burst of flames put paid to the idea that he might ever rise from where he'd fallen. Yet for each one Artemio put down, yet more had mounted the stage. A veritable horde, now filling in the last thin channel between him and the Last King. The man's face was still hidden, but there was no doubt in Artemio's mind that he was gloating.

Something had shaken loose with the blow to his head. Tears flooded down Artemio's face now, parting the soot and frosting on his cheeks when Bisnonno Fiore passed through him. He lanced out flame after flame, focused and tight, blue hot and piercing. Everyone that it touched screamed and sobbed and split open bloodlessly. Wounds already cauterised. But on more and more of them came. He could not do



this forever, and they could keep coming without pause. There could be a hundred of them, a thousand. He had only the shallow well of his own years to draw on, and each time the bucket came up it felt lighter. He could almost hear Fiore's voice in his head, demanding that he leave. Demanding that he abandon his post and save himself.

"Art!" Harmony's voice cut through the roar of flames and the screaming of the dying. She was here. She was alive.

"Harmony?!" The darkness fell away from the edges of Artemio's vision as his focus returned. There were a dozen men and women between him and the edge of the stage. They would not slow him.

With the same simple gesture that had parted the crowds outside of the Sabbia townhouse he lanced out lines of flame and hauled them apart. Some stood their ground, trying to endure the flame, to block his path. For these, he spent a little more of his life, flaring the fires blue hot and parting flesh as easily as the empty air.

When he stepped forward, he felt the shade being ripped from the back of his body, the forge-spirit still standing strong and burning bright in his wake. Upholding its end of their bargain, pushing back the crowds so he could charge on. Fiore was with him still, surrounding him in chill air to push back the inferno that he'd created. Lightening his steps. Driving him on.

With one wild leap from the stage's edge he soared down to land in a crumpled heap by his sister's side. Flinging himself into a roll to avoid snapping both legs like twigs, but barrelling into the legs of the gathered crowd before his momentum could be spent. They tumbled on top of him, an awful crush of sweating, stinking humanity. They smelled of the sewers, of flop houses, of manure and desperation and manual labour's salty crust. Artemio wrestled his way upright, through them. Digging in his hands and prying apart the places where bodies met.

He burst free into the air to see Harmony's booted heel pass an inch from his face, slamming the last of the heap in the ribs and rolling him aside. Her own rapier was snapped in two, his one was slick with blood.

She'd garbed herself in his clothes for the night's work, and while they'd been well suited to this expedition, they were beyond repair. Bloodied and tattered. Yet she had not a scratch upon her.

"Alright?"

She clubbed a charging peasant in the face with the hilt of her broken sword, flicking out the intact blade to knock an ill-held club from a dog-girl's bristly hands. All with a smile on her face. "I'm so glad you invited me to this party, dear brother. I would have hated to miss it. Truly, the event of the season."

"Oh don't pretend you're having a bad time." He managed to haul himself loose of the fallen before any of them managed their way back to their feet, and recalled the forge-spirit to douse them in flames. There were wrinkles on his hands when he saw them lit up by that grim pyre. How much had he aged in this one clash? Or was it simply that his eyes were now failing him too.

She kicked at those who were down, and slashed at those still fleeing her reach. A red line split the back of one woman's dress baring whip scars running the same direction. "Still," Harmony panted. "Perhaps it is time we made our departure?"

The exits were rapidly being blocked by the swarming peasantry. They had dawdled too long to make a clean escape. "The stage."

"The stage?" She thrust past him into a knife-wielding stranger that he'd never have seen coming. As she whipped back into her ready position, a shower of blood struck his back. "Do you plan to sing your way out of trouble?"

"I presume a bawdy tavern song would improve everyone's temperament." He forced out a laugh as they started another run at the smouldering structure. Harmony fell into step beside him. His flames and her blade keeping the stragglers who had not fled them well at bay.

When faced with the death of their ringleader, the rebels had all flocked to the stage to protect him. Such devotion, Artemio could scant believe it. The result of this was a mass of bodies around the bottom of the stage and very few of them with the wherewithal to actually mount the thing.

An idea was beginning to push its way up out of the swampy waters of Artemio's exhaustion. Less a coherent plan and more an image composed of fractal memories that he was trying desperately to pull together into something more substantial. "Stop."

"No. No stopping." She leapt and kicked into the gut of a great lumbering mongrel who looked to have the head of a cow. Some country buffoon dragged into all of this. Artemio needed to stop memorising them. Stop working out the details. He did not have the time for analysis. Harmony hamstringed the towering man as she darted past him, and they let him fall on his friends. "Stopping is the opposite of a good plan. Stopping leads to catching, and catching leads to us being overwhelmed in a tide of unwashed heathens labouring under the delusion that the ability to sweep a street entitles you to command all who walk it."

"Just wait, one moment. Just... one..."

He could see the fury rising on her face, but by then it was too late, she had stopped.

Along the base of the stage, the timbers were blackened and burning. Artemio's first wildfire wash had struck it and passed by without dealing much in the way of damage. Yet still, fire clung there, just needing to be stoked a little hotter to bring the whole thing down.

This was going to hurt.

The Forge-Spirit leapt forward, more than delighted to do what it did best, but for Artemio, things were less joyous. If he went on aging himself so rapidly, there could be no doubt that it would end in collapse. Harmony could not fight and carry him, so if he faltered here, they would both fall. What luck then that he was a student of history. He knew the ways that the Shadebound of old had made their sacrifices to the things they knew as gods. He knew the way that his debt could be paid without it costing their lives.

Reaching out with the same mastery of his spirit that allowed him to feed and restrain the shades in his service, he made a ring and tightened it around the smallest finger on his empty left hand. It ached as the binding of spirit cut into it, and it burned with an awful coldness when that ring tightened right through the flesh and bone until the whole thing was severed from the remainder of his spirit. All the life divided from the rest of him. All the years that were left to that one small part of him, now dangling loose. With one last pulse of will, he tossed it into the waiting maw of the Forge-Spirit.

The stage burst into flames. An explosion of sudden heat and destruction so violent it knocked them both back onto their heels and tossed the closest clustered peasants to their knees. Blue-hot and dazzling bright, it burned. But not all of it. Even in this, Artemio had maintained his control.

The front supports of the stage burned away to ash, the crossbeams buckled with a shriek and the whole rickety structure tumbled forward. The stage had been meant to hold one orator, not a whole crowd of bodyguards and buffoons rushing to the aid of their King. Even without half the structure broken or burnt, it could not have held them all for long. Artemio had simply helped things along.

As it fell, more and more bodies tumbled into the heap of bodies at the stage's base, and as they struck, more and more of those trying to flee from the impending death by a thousand splinters were pinned in place by the weight of bodies. Their numbers had been turned against them.

In all of the chaos, Artemio tried as he might to catch sight of the Last King, but already that man had secreted himself away in some place of safety. Or for all that Artemio knew, he'd simply cast aside his crown and vanished into the crowd. All were garbed the same, all were fleeing the same, if he were but another peasant, then of course he'd vanish among them without a trace. But what peasant could bind a shade?

When the stage fell, dozens were crushed beneath it, and twice as many were floored by the tumbling debris, or the tumbling fools who had fallen from its height. A clear path was open to the water of the still lake ahead, and there, at the far end of the ladder that had once run up the length of the stage's rear, was their escape. A rowboat, not even tied up in the still water, just drifting in slow circles. Harmony saw it too, dropping her broken hilt and seizing her brother by the scruff of his ragged shawl. "Move."

Together they ran once more, leaping as best they could through the fallen, Harmony's blade darting out when there was a hint of resistance. They could have made better time if she hadn't been dispensing her own twisted version of mercy, but that would have left even more enemies at their heels, and of those they had more than enough. Already those who'd fled to guard the exits were rushing back in, to help those who were injured and to chase those who'd done the injury.

Artemio wondered how many of the little businesses about town would be closed due to unexpected injuries and illness, come the dawn.

"How much time have you spent, Art?" Harmony's eyes kept darting to him, even as she fought.

For her to even ask so bluntly, there must have been fresh lines on his face, or new grey in his hair. "Dear sister, I'd spend a hundred years if it meant we'd live to see the end of the night."

The battle-joy on her face faltered for only a moment as she realised how close they must both have been to death. Walking on the knife's edge. Then a peasant swung what looked like a copper warming pan at her and it was gone.

Once they mounted the rocking wood of the shattered stage, the going became both easier and infinitely more difficult. There were no enemies trying to halt them here, but the ground beneath their feet was beyond unstable and into the realm of the comical. Like the touring fairground funhouse that they'd both attended as babes, before father took the reins on their upbringing. They rocked from side to side, counterbalancing one another, or launching the other from the see-saw end of another timber.

Up and down they went, seeking equilibrium and a few steps of balance where they could, but finding little. It should have been some comfort to them that any pursuer would be similarly encumbered, but the truth was that they had no pursuit.

When the outer crowds returned to the rescue of the friends and kin from the fallen stage, none pursued them onto the still-collapsing heap. Rather, they drew lengths of corded leather from their scorched sleeves, snatched up what debris they could find and began slinging it after the twins.

For once, fortune seemed to be favouring the Volpes. The erratic motion of the rocking timbers and the chaotic path that they were forced to pursue to avoid areas of collapse made them trickier targets, but not impossible ones. A soaring rock clipped Artemio's shoulder, bruising to the bone and setting him off balance. He stumbled, caught a jagged length of upturned wood in his hip for his trouble, and then took off once more, bleeding profusely down one leg.

The next few shots went wild, but the last struck Harmony square between the shoulders. She went down hard, face slamming clean through a smouldering board. Artemio's heart stopped for the moment she lay there, still and silent, then he heard her sweet voice cussing like a sailor and he could breathe again. He leapt to her side and promptly caught a soaring rock to the top of his scalp, sending a fresh wash of blood down to burst through the clotted mess that already covered his hair. Lucky it was already red, really.

When he blinked away the stars, he was on his knees beside his sister, hauling her up, pulling the long splinter of wood that had imbedded itself into her cheek clear and hoping that it hadn't taken any of her teeth out. Her smile had been charming, once upon a time, he still held onto some faint hope that he might see it again, and that it might be unmarred.

She cursed his name as he hauled the wood out, called him all manner of awful things and strongly suggested many rude and untrue things about his mother, who was of course also her mother. It mattered little. They were just the noises she was making to project the pain out from her body because she had no time to feel it.

The two of them pulled each other up, each taking a turn to climb the other a distance before switching. On their feet, there was a spinning moment of disorientation until another stone exploded a heap of wood beside them into splinters, then they were off once more, bounding over the bare rock that now took up more and more of the space before finally reaching the boat.

Artemio leapt onto the rower's bench and had barely taken hold of the oars before Harmony's boot caught him in the back and threw him into the stern. "What in damnation's name?"

She slipped into place on the bench and started stroking with all of her strength. In between heaves, she barked out. "I row, you fight. Not like a sword will do us any good on the water."

Artemio managed to right himself without overturning the boat, then immediately ducked again to miss another slung shot. Kneeling in the water in the bottom of the dingy, he managed to gasp out. "You're hurt."

She spat out a mouthful of blood. Not over the side, as he'd hoped, but at her feet. Where he was kneeling. Her voice came out more growl than words. "We're both hurt. We'll both get even more hurt if you keep arguing. Especially you. Because I'll hurt you."

That was enough like her usual self that his worries evaporated away. If she was well enough to threaten him with grievous bodily harm, then she was most assuredly well enough to row a little boat out of the cave.

He flung a few lances of flame back at the huge heap of wood they'd left in their wake. It was a pyre just waiting to be ignited, so he did what came natural to him. It barely cost him any more of his life. The Forge-Spirit was well sated after the massive meal he'd already given to it, not to mention that it truly loved to burn things more than anything else. It was less like he commanded it to unleash fire upon the world, and more that he let it slip loose to do what it desired the most.

Fire spread, smoke rose and the baying crowds of rebels faded from sight as Harmony drew back on the oars once more. Exhaustion caught Artemio at last. A soft, full-body ache that he knew he could sink down into and be relieved of all his worries and cares. But it wasn't done. He was still on the very edge of death, even if it did not feel like it.

His mouth felt like it were stuffed with wool as he mumbled to his sister. "Sword."

"What good will a sword do you?" She took in his glazed eyes. His fading strength. She rolled her eyes. "Just settle down."

He would not settle. He reached out with a shaking hand. "Harm. I need it."

With a grunt of disgust, she released an oar and flung it from the seat beside her in his direction. It clattered to a halt beside him. It was slick with blood, but another swift pulse of flame wiped it clean as it could be, and a second pulse heated it, so that the wounds it dealt would be sealed.

Then, finally, Artemio set his hand on the side of the boat, and he looked at what he'd done.

The smallest finger on his left hand was sickly pale, almost blue with how bloodless it was. All of it except for the nail, and the tip, which were already beginning to blacken with decay. A whole lifetime's worth of time applied to it in an instant. No wonder it was already dead and rotting like it had been in the grave a year. That blackness was a poison that would spread throughout his whole body if he let it. He curled all the other fingers down until they were out of the way and only the dead one remained.

One deep breath, and then the next. Lining the side of the rapier with the demarcation on his finger and the wood below. He'd have to cut below the dead tissue, into the little stump of meat that still lived, otherwise the rot would spread from there. There was no bringing the dead finger back. Not even an inch, but if he did not cut low enough, whatever he remained would putrefy.

Harmony realised what he was doing an instant before he did it, crying out, reaching for him. She was too slow. The blade cut in, living blood burst out, bright and red, then it sizzled to black as it touched the heated metal. There was no pain in Artemio's life that he could compare to that moment. But he had done it. He would live.

The severed finger toppled off the boat's side into the water, Artemio toppled back into the water at the bottom. Harmony was screaming at him, shouting all manner of insults, kicking at him, doing whatever she could to keep him awake, to make him talk. The explanation was going to be too long. The conversation too draining. He didn't want to do it. They were alive. He'd made it so that they'd both live. Everything else would have to wait.