

**10 - The Waking Dream**  
*Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112*

On her bed of hay, Orsina stirred. In the moment of waking, everyone suffers a moment of uncertainty, when they do not know where they are, what time it is, what they should be doing next. It is a fundamental part of the human condition. Less common was what Orsina suffered, when she opened her eyes, she could not remember who she was. She couldn't remember what she was.

In front of her face lay straw and dirt, a not uncommon bed for her in her childhood. As Mother Vinegar, she never slept. That was part and parcel of her legend. As a dragon, her rest came when she rode upon thermals, gliding through the open sky. As each of the other shades, sleep was so distant a memory that she could not even picture it. She was none of them and all of them.

But it was Orsina's body that ached, her lips that were chapped and dry after her long coma. She was weak in a way she had not been even after her long convalescence before she departed for Covotana. There had been no motherly hands lifting her head and spooning broth into her mouth. There had been no care taken for her at all. There were bruises all over her, the half-healed hurts of her fall, of course, but others too. An ache at her ankles and wrists where she had been trussed up and hauled around. Bruises on her shoulders, hips, thighs, arms, where she had been manhandled about. If she were to peel back the sooty cloth of her blouse, there would likely be clear handprints on her skin.

She tried to move, and that was the latest in a long line of bad decisions that had led to this point. It took only a moment of aching before she slumped back into her limp state. A piece of straw was jutting up to scratch at the side of her nose, and it could just stay there for now. Ticklish was better than sore.

The big complex questions of who she was and who now occupied this body were too much to tackle at that moment in time. She had just woken up, and she needed a few minutes before

her brain could go from a walk to a canter. Instead, she focused outwards for the first time in who knew how long. The straw she knew, the patchy grass flattened out beneath her was also familiar, the dirt was like the stuff back home, more or less. A little paler, a little drier, but otherwise good old-fashioned dirt. Familiar. Safe.

Extending her gaze farther, there was a bucket. Perhaps containing water. It didn't much matter where in the world you were, buckets looked much the same. This one was bound with some woven material instead of a band of iron, but such a thing was familiar outside of the big cities. Familiarity. Safety. If she kept her vision focused only on the inches about her, she had nothing to fear.

Beyond that, concern began to mount. Wooden canes were set upon the earth, bound together with a ring of horizontal bars of the same material, bent to follow the curve a few feet up. That same rope held them together, fresh-cut instead of the old and settled stuff of the bucket. She didn't move her head, because that was a sure recipe for finding some new ache, but with her eyes, she followed it around until it became clear it was some sort of pen for animals. A cage that had been simply dropped here on the open land instead of being embedded into the soil. That was silly. She could get up, pick the thing up, and duck underneath, strolling off to wherever she pleased.

It made no sense, and too many things were making no sense at the moment, so she pressed her eyes shut and waited for the tempest to calm a little before making a second attempt at understanding what was going on around her.

There was chatter. She was not alone in the middle of nowhere; there were people, talking, working, living their lives all around her where she lay in a cage as though it were entirely normal to have caged women lying around in the middle of your village. That was definite cause for concern. At least it explained why they weren't worrying about an escape attempt. If she tried to walk away, presumably someone would stop her.

She tried to focus on the voices amidst the hubbub, but she couldn't pick out a single word. Even trying to parse the language of her own thoughts was a strain for now. She stayed as still as she could, breathed as slowly as she could, held on to this moment. To this place. The feel of the straw on her face, the warmth of the sun beating down from above, even the pain helped to ground her and keep her here. The battle inside her had come to a standstill, not because of a lack of will, but because of a lack of progress. Each shade may have hungered for dominance and

raged against all of the others, but none of them could make any real progress alone. Alliance was impossible when the end goal was complete subjugation of all the others, and the only one with a mind complex enough to encompass subterfuge was the one trying to hold the rest off from Orsina.

She shuddered as she thought on them. Tremors of that distant battle felt even here back in the real world. Strange for her to call it that, when it felt the opposite. When all that she had experienced within herself seemed so much more vivid than anything out here.

Once more, she forced her eyes open. Forced herself to see what was outside of herself. Clung to it like an anchor. Her eyes took in more now, beyond the bars of the cage were Arazi, some looking mostly human, some as bulky and marked as heavily with dragon-scale as Kagan had been. Strolling alongside them were creatures. Things she had never even dreamed of before the battle.

Her mind slid away from the battle before that memory could sink its hooks into her.

There were more varieties of wyverns strolling through the middle of the camp than she had encountered in all her life out in the wild places of the world. Some bearing burdens like they were donkeys. Others garbed in bright-colored barding to mark their allegiance. At first she had thought such things were meant to convey ownership, to explain which of the Arazi commanded them, but just a moment's observation made it clear that the wyverns were equal to the humans around them, not subservient. A man would step aside for an oversized lizard as though it were a gentleman of note. The barding seemed to denote status in some way, the more ornate of the wyverns being given precedence over the plain and humans alike.

To have such wild beasts in the heart of their camp would have been unthinkable to the people of Espher. Even back in Sheepshank, the pigs were kept penned, and the sheep were fenced off from the crops and village alike. Horses were tied up away from their riders so that the stable hands could brush them down and see to their feeding. The line between man and animal was firmly drawn. But here, there was no line. Not even a blurring, just no distinction between them whatsoever.

She couldn't stay still all day. Even if she were not so thirsty that she had serious concerns that her throat may have closed up, there were other biological demands making themselves known, along with the horrifying implications of the bucket. Movement would hurt, but after that brush with her internal world, anything that helped to ground her in reality could only be a good

thing. She rolled, nice and slow, first onto her back to stare up into the bright blue expanse beyond her woven birdcage and then over onto her other side.

Beyond the wicker cage on that side lay a dragon. Both eyes almost crossed trying to stare at her. She would have screamed if her throat would have let her, but all she really managed was a wheeze.

It was not one of the lesser wyverns or one of the young dragons that she had faced off with in the skies above Espher. The sleekness had gone with age, its scales grown thick as armor plates and its body bulking out to match its new burden. Even the wild dragon she had fought in the Selvaggia was not so massive as this creature. Where the scales of most ran a gamut of camouflaging colors in creams and browns, this one was blackened from the jaws back. Two long streams of soot stains so ingrained along the length of its neck that there would be no removing them, no matter how they were polished. All about its muzzle shone obsidian black in the sunlight.

Only the bright yellow of its eyes, locked on Orsina, stood out amidst the mass of scales. Shining not only with the faint amber glow that all the great dragon-kin's eyes seemed to share, but also with intelligence. It was watching her to see what she did, not like a predator waiting for the opportune moment to strike, but like a vast human being observing a prisoner.

With painstaking slowness, she eased herself up to sitting, eyes never leaving the dragon. It did not move, except to follow her with its gaze as she moved slowly from sitting to standing and then over to the dreaded bucket. There was water inside. Fresh, clean. She dropped back down to her knees and cupped it in her hands, pulling it up to her lips before thoughts of things like poison could even cross her mind. Harmony would have thought of them; she planned ahead and thought things through, while Orsina caved to her base impulses instantly. The chill of it hurt her teeth, then when it hit her dried-out throat, she choked on it. Spluttering and coughing until it sprayed back out of her mouth. Still desperate, she had no sooner spilled it all down herself than she brought another handful to her lips. This time, she slowed, let a trickle down. Felt her tongue swell back into shape, her gums, her throat. By the time she was reaching for the next mouthful, she could actually swallow, by the time she had finished swallowing, her attention was dragged back to the dragon where it lay, watching and waiting.

With some distance, she could see more of the creature, the tail coiled back to run along one side, the wings carefully furled so that it would take up as little room as possible, and so that the

business of the camp could go on all about it without having to adjust for a monstrous beast bigger than a cart parked in the middle of everything.

Orsina wet her lips and flinched as the cracks in them stung. “Hello?”

Perhaps it was foolish to expect the dragon to speak back. Perhaps it was foolish to expect anything but death here among her enemies. Still, she gathered her breath and tried again. “Hello?!”

The dragon moved. It was barely perceptible, just a little shuffle that set the scales along its body rattling together, but it was enough to catch attention, to let the Arazi know she was awake. There was more shouting in that language she didn’t know.

Maybe the memories implanted in her by the Owl shade had contained some primer on the basics of their language, but even her own memories were a tattered mess barely hanging together at this point. If she tried wandering off into others, she was liable to never find her way back again. Then again, it was just as likely that the library of Septombra contained no such book. Espher tended to view its distant northern neighbors as barbarians. One did not lower oneself to speak to a hound by barking.

Orsina wasn’t like that, of course. If given the opportunity, she would have listened to every growl and yelp, but it didn’t help if she couldn’t understand any of it.

From the parting crowd emerged one of the dragon-lords. The hulking men and women who had bonded with one of the true dragons instead of their lesser kin. They stood taller than other Arazi, fought with all the might of their mounts, and bore the same thick scales upon their skin. It was hard to believe, looking up at this one, that Orsina had managed to kill one of them. Let alone so many of them. “Hello?”

It did not seem that the looming giant, armored in bone and glowering at her with barely contained loathing, was in the mood for pleasant conversation. That was probably just as well. Hello was about all that Orsina could muster at that moment. His voice was a deep rumble she felt in her stomach as much as she heard it. Hair on the back of her neck rose up when he growled, “You will be silent. You will be still. You will listen. You will obey.”

She held up her empty hands, as if this monstrous thing could be in any way scared of her. Empty-handed or not. “Okay.”

The Arazi rumbled on as if she had not interrupted. “You will not call on your magic. You will not influence our minds. You will not summon the dead to aid you.”

She slowly let her hands fall back to her sides. It hurt too much to keep them up. “Wouldn’t know how to do most of that.”

The bark became a roar, and Orsina stumbled back under the impact of it. “You will be silent.”

She kept her mouth firmly closed this time. She had sense enough for that.

“A torch will burn through the night. If you bear more than one shadow, you will die. If you try to cast a spell, you will die. If we see any sign of your magic being used, you will die.” He continued this dire litany in his more tolerable growl, pausing only once to establish that she was still listening. “You will raise your fist to show that you understand and agree.”

She held up her hand and clenched a fist. No need to anger him any more than she had already.

“You will travel with us north. You will be bound and gagged when we travel. If you try to escape, you will die. If you try to conjure, you will die. Always, you will be observed.”

She didn’t mean to speak, honestly she didn’t, but it seemed that her mind and mouth had finally been reconnected without any of the usual good sense or delay between them. “Why am I going north?”

“You will be silent,” he hissed. Then, seeing no good reason not to answer: “You will stand before the Prophet and be judged. Then our war on Espher will end.”

So much had happened to her since she fell in battle. So much that she had no say or control over. She supposed that it should have made her frightened to be so powerless, but instead it left her furious. She snapped back, “I’m going to be judged? For what? Fighting back when you invaded us?”

He stepped up closer to the bars, and she saw that even his teeth had been changed by his bond with the dragon by his side. They were conical and pointed, fit only for tearing meat. Blackened with soot to an obsidian shine, just like the dragon’s. “You will be judged, to decide what you are. To decide what will be done to you.”

She wasn’t even sure what that meant if she was being honest. Perhaps something was being lost in translation. “Uh.”

“Be silent,” he intoned one last time. Soft and rumbling her bones. Not angry anymore. Almost too calm. “Make peace with your gods. But do it in silence.”

When it became clear that she didn't intend on blurting out any answer to that, he turned his back on her and walked away. The golden eyes of the dragon were still upon her, even if his were not. She'd know no peace.

If she tried anything, all the dragon needed to do was open its mouth and breathe out. The wooden cage wouldn't protect her, it would just be kindling for the fire. Whatever else she had forgotten in her long sleep, the touch of dragon fire would never truly leave her. The mess of scars across her back were a testament to its awful power. They'd barely brushed her before. To bear the full weight of the dragon's searing venom would be a pain beyond anything she'd ever known. Even the torments that had raked her spirit since her capture would pale compared with that pure, flaming hurt.

So left with nothing else to do, she returned to her bucket and drank her fill before unbuckling her belt. If they wanted to watch her every moment of the day, that was their shame, not hers. The prickling blush on her cheeks mattered little in the grand scale of things.

Perhaps this was a normal sight to see among these barbarous people. Perhaps they were being polite in looking away. All she could say for certain was that it was less of an embarrassment than she had been expecting. Perhaps she hadn't absorbed all the lessons of shame that Harmony had been trying to impart on her. Holding forks wrong wouldn't have raised an eyebrow here any more than it had back home in Sheepshank.

Regardless, with her business done, she was now left at a loose end. She moved away from the bucket to the far end, even though it put her right beside the dragon. So long as she didn't try to call her shades, the dragon wouldn't burn her alive. Probably. And if it meant to, then the extra few feet of distance wouldn't make any difference anyway. Weirdly, there was something comforting about the steady huff of its breath over her. There was a faint tang of venom on its breath that she wasn't sure she'd ever get accustomed to, but beyond that it was like... it was like sleeping in a ditch, wrapped in Kagan's protective arms. Her whole trip to Covotana, they'd fallen asleep huddled for warmth. She couldn't believe that she was looking back on that misery fondly now. Just went to show, things could always get worse.

"Am I allowed to talk to you? Giant dragon, you probably aren't going to fall for my magical wiles or whatever the big guy was scared of."

The dragon remained partially cross-eyed. She wasn't right at its nose, but close enough to make it look funny.

“So, am I meant to be scared of you or what? Do they not know I kill dragons? Were they not paying attention?”

There was no reply, because dragons didn't speak. She turned her back on the dragon and sank gratefully back down to the dirt. Her straw heap had spread far enough this way that it was slightly better than nothing. Slightly. Leaning back on the cage made it shift slightly, but she was light enough that it didn't slide away from her. “Of course, to kill you I'd have to call my shades, and then you'd set me on fire, and it would be a race to see who could kill who first, and I don't think either of us really want to find out, do we?”

She let her head loll back to rest on a crossbar. Every movement still hurt, but it was definitely getting better. “Then again, calling my shades might just make me turn into a comatose blob again. I can't find out what they're up to in here without going and looking, and if I go and look, I might end up blobbed. Bit of a conundrum.”

The general chatter of the camp had resumed now that the dragon-lord had departed, but she still found herself in a bubble of silence.

“Blobbed.” She liked the feel of it in her mouth.

The silence stretched out again as she took a keen interest in what everyone else was up to. It seemed that they were in the process of breaking camp, but with one this big, that was no fast process. Different hide tents were rolled up together in a particular order. The bent canes that made her cage were being used to support them, and they too had to be broken down, separated out into their respective piles and bundled. And that wasn't even taking into account all of the objects that had been in tents, or spread out on blankets in front of them, or hung over campfires. Everyone seemed to know what they were doing, and they were doing it with all due diligence, but everyone was also waiting for everyone else to finish one part of the job before they could get on with the next. It was hardly an operation being run with military precision. Artemio probably would have been having conniptions over how long it was taking them. Big stickler for organization.

She tilted her head a little further back to catch a glimpse of the hulking dragon. Upside down, it wasn't any less intimidating, although it had at least stopped trying to stare directly at her and was now just looking off into the middle distance. “So how is being a dragon treating you? Do you enjoy having someone riding on your back all the time? I can't imagine it is fun.”

“You get used to it.”



Her head snapped around at the sound of a voice, and all the aches and pains she thought were abating flared back up. What could have been a greeting or a sound of surprise instead emerged as a strangled yelp.

The Arazi by the side of her cage laughed. "I did not mean to startle you."

His voice was heavily accented, the full-bodied version of Kagan's occasionally clipped words, but there was none of that dreadful rumble that the big Arazi had. He was scaled, but sleek.

"How would you know what a dragon thinks about being ridden?"

He shrugged, and now that the initial shock had passed, she could get a good look at him. The leathers he wore were faded from too much time in the sun, and the bright feathers woven through his hair could only have come from one of the terror-birds. He didn't look much older than her, not that she could really tell how old she looked anymore after all the ups and down of feeding life to her shades.

"Can't speak for the big ones, but my wyvern likes it well enough. Once she got used to the weight. Feels naked without me."

He was treating her like a human being, and despite herself, she liked him for it. "She told you that, did she?"

"Clear as day." He grinned with pointed teeth. Not so pronounced as the lord's jagged maw, but still a predator's jaws.

A smile was fighting its way onto her face, even as it made her cracked lips sting. "Your commander was under the impression that I could control minds with my words."

That seemed to catch his interest. He glanced from side to side before theatrically whispering, "Can you?"

She had to strangle a laugh. "No. But if I could, I'd probably say I couldn't."

He dropped down to sit beside her, putting his back to the other side of the cage. "If you do control my mind, try to do a better job keeping it in line than I do."

She twisted to look at him, wondering where he was going with this. "Aren't you worried you'll get in trouble?"

He shrugged. "Some things are worth the trouble."

They sat in silence for a moment, basking in the sunshine, pointedly ignoring the dragon glowering down at the pair of them. Eventually whatever manic energy had driven him to

wander over to her overspilled, and he had to talk again. “He isn’t my boss. Different clan. We march together, but that doesn’t mean he can tell me what to do.”

Thinking was coming hard to Orsina. So many parts of her mind had been ravaged in the past few days. So many of the connections she had struggled so hard to make so she could pass as a noblewoman had been untethered and now flapped loose. There was probably some polite and cunning way to ask him things that would actually help her without giving away her intentions, but she didn’t have the capacity to come up with them. Not without delving into those dangerous parts of her mind where the shades still lurked, waiting to strike. She blurted out, “What is it exactly you think you’re going to get out of this?”

Perhaps something was lost in translation; he didn’t seem to understand what she was asking. “What do you mean?”

She tried to put it into as simple terms as she could, so that there was no opportunity for their crossed languages to cause trouble. “Where is the reward to balance the risk of you getting into trouble?”

He laughed. “It isn’t often you get a chance to see the devil up close.”

“The devil?” It wasn’t a familiar word to her. She’d heard of religion during her stay in Covotana but had felt no real need to explore it further when she had so many more pressing areas of study.

“The... I don’t know your word.” He sat pondering for a moment. “The worst thing?”

That hurt more than she would have guessed. “You... think I’m a monster?”

“I think I’m saying it wrong.” He had winced at her tone. Maybe the words were harder to parse than the inflection. Maybe he had thought that a monster would be proud of its title. “In stories, there are the bad people, and then there is the one, the worst. The others can get better, can learn. But never the worst. There is only one end for the worst.”

Carefully keeping her tone even, she replied, “And I’m the... irredeemable?”

“That’s what they say.” He looked away, guiltily.

It took Orsina some time to get her head around this fresh indictment. She couldn’t understand it. She couldn’t understand where this loathing for her came from. She didn’t mean to speak aloud, but her mind and mouth were still short on their usual separations. “What did I do? I fought back? Was I meant to just let you come in and kill everyone? Was I meant to let my friends go out and die and do nothing?”

“I do not think...” He seemed to be struggling with his words even more than before. “Ah. This is difficult. It is not what you did. It is what you are.”

She let her head loll back again, staring up into the sky. If there were unshed tears in her eyes, he could not have seen them. Pain, exhaustion, she had no shortage of excuses. When she spoke it was so softly that he had to lean closer to hear her.

“What am I?”

He blew out a huff of air. Then let his head fall back on the bars too. Technically his forehead was inside. Risky behavior that the overlooking dragon was certain to have noted.

“What do you know of us?”

“The Arazi?” Orsina stalled for time. In truth she knew almost nothing of them. There had always been legends about them of course, but they were abstract, less real than even the folklore that was passed around Sheepshank in place of history. They lived in far-off lands. They had enslaved even the mighty dragons. They were mighty warriors who ruled with an iron fist and the flames of their mounts. Kagan would not speak of his people; everything about them was an open wound in that man. Just the memory of home burned him, so Orsina had never pried. Even when she finally came to Covotana and was set against them in a war, all she had learned was how to fight them. Not who they were. To learn who they were would have made it harder to kill them, not easier. She had avoided all knowledge of them.

He interrupted her train of thought. “The Arazi. Do you even know what that name means?”

“Oh, I’m sure it means mighty conquerors or dragon tamers or some nonsense like that.” She tried to play off her ignorance, and thanks to the wonders of the language gap, it actually worked.

He smiled up at the sky, as if this story was a happy memory. The kind of thing he’d heard as a little boy, gathered around the campfire. “It means The Chosen.”

Just like the nobles back in Espher, so sure that they were better than everyone else. “And who chose you exactly?”

His head clunked against the cage when he laughed, cutting it off short. “I like you; you ask the right questions. Not why are they special, but who decided they are.”

She turned her gaze back to the sky. So long as they were talking, she did not need to think about what was coming. She did not have to think about what it meant to be a prisoner of the enemy. “And your answer?”

He settled himself more comfortably, rubbing at the back of his head absentmindedly. “Long ago, we were just warring tribes. We fought one another for land. For food. For nothing. We bonded with the wyverns, but aslinda-dragons, they frightened us.”

Orsina twisted to meet the golden gaze of the monster standing guard. “They are terrifying.”

“You have only seen them in battle. I have mucked out their aeries.” He widened his eyes as though he had seen true horrors. “You do not know fear.”

She rolled her eyes. “So, you were scared of dragons and fighting like savages...”

“Then came the change, from the high tundra, a dragon came down, bearing a rider.” He spread his arms as though they were wings, like he was making some grand proclamation. “The first of the Arazi. The first chosen to protect our world.”

Until now it had been just another self-aggrandizing story for just another empire. But that was enough to give her pause again. “Protect it from what?”

“Through Konus, her rider, the dragon spoke.” His eyes closed when he spoke the rider’s name. Like this wasn’t some figure from history, but a god. “They warned of the world’s end. A creature born of death that would consume all life and light if it was not stopped.”

It didn’t take Orsina long to understand where this was going. “I’m not a shade.”

“I did not think you were.” He reached over and prodded her in the side, making her yelp in surprise. “Too fleshy.”

She shuffled a little farther around her cage, trying not to laugh. She had to remember where she was. Who she was with. “So why do they think that I’m...”

He went on with his story. “Konus united us, his dragon led us to others, and our young were bonded to them in partnership, not dominance. All were united in fear of this doom. All dragons stand on the side of the living. Of the flame.”

Orsina interrupted again. “What does this have to do with...”

“To be Arazi is to hunt this foe.” He didn’t let her cut in. He pressed on with his story. “To mark it as your enemy. To strive towards its defeat with all that you are. It is...

She spoke right over him this time. “What does that have to do with me?!”

“You need to understand, it is not some small... matter.” He had struggled for only a moment with the word. Just long enough to remind her how sorely her own education in foreign tongues was lacking. “It is all that makes us what we are. It is all that united us, brought us together, to range across the world in one great hunt.”

Maybe something really was getting lost in translation, so she spoke loudly and simply as she could. “I understand, you’ve made it perfectly clear, but what has this hunt got to do with…”

“It is you.” He turned to meet her stare. Gazing into her eyes as though he hoped to find the truth hidden in them. Like she might blink and reveal her true monstrosity. “Or they think it is you. The Adversary. The Prey.”

She’d known it was coming, but it still left her gobsmacked to hear it said out loud. “But I’m just… I’m just another Shadebound. There are hundreds of us. Nothing I did was special or different.”

The camp was growing quieter now, the tents all felled, the bundles stowed away on the backs of terror-birds and wyverns. The true dragons, those the Azari called *aslinda*, they were the only ones that bore no burden. The stillness meant that they could not rely upon the clatter and chatter to cover their conversation now. They had to speak softly.

He said, “They know of your necromancers, and still, they think that it is you.”

Orsina pressed her eyes shut and tried to think. If they thought she was this world-ending nightmare, then she’d be killed. There was no question about it. If she believed a word of it, then she’d have been the first to volunteer herself to face the headsman’s block. But they were wrong about her. Now she just had to convince them of that. Prove her innocence. “What is this monster I’m meant to be?”

“Ah.” He looked out across the now cleared field and waved his arm. One of the wyverns that had been milling about, unburdened by much more than a saddle, came stalking through the crowd towards them. It was a pretty thing, as far as wyverns went. A ridge down the top of its head was flanked with bright feathers. He still seemed to be struggling to find the words. “It is… the elders speak of it like… hmm.”

Orsina sighed. “You don’t even know what it is?”

“Your language, it is difficult.” He spun his hands over one another. “I have to put together many words to make simple thoughts.”

“Well, you’re better at *Espheran* than I am at… What do you people even speak?”

As he rose to his feet, he made a throaty sound. There was something like a click in the middle. It took Orsina a moment to understand that he had not injured himself but had spoken the name of the language. “I’m not even going to try to pronounce that. I’ll make a fool of myself.”

He snapped his fingers just as the wyvern arrived and nudged at him with its snout. “Rats. Do you have rats in Espher?”

She eyed the straw pile that had been her bed with no small amount of trepidation. “Doesn’t everywhere have rats?”

“Well, rats, when they live together, they all sleep in one place, all together, on top of one another.” He pointed to her bed. “Like, like straw heaped up.”

She blinked at him, waiting for this to approach any semblance of relevance.

“Well, sometimes it goes wrong. Their tails, they get tied together, they’re... knotted. Many made one. There is an Arazi word, but yours it is... ah...”

She remembered. Not from her studies in Septombra, not from her time living in a farming village perpetually beset by rats, but from one of Mother Vinegar’s stories. “A rat king.”

“Yes. They tangle tails, but they still live, they move together, eat together, hunt together. All different but all one.”

It was more than that, Orsina knew. Mother Vinegar had spoken of the rat king in great length, as if it were some sort of moral lesson that Orsina needed to absorb. The rats’ tails often broke in the tangle, but when their bodies were studied afterwards, they had healed into a new formation, keeping them locked together, but also proving that the rats lived long enough for even bones to knit while they were combined in such a manner. They survived, despite being unable to function alone, to eat or scavenge. Some thought that other rats gathered food to sustain them, proving some sort of rodent camaraderie. Some thought that through their tangled tails, the rat king truly became one creature, thinking with one mind, moving all together.

“I’m really not following what any of this has to do with me.”

“They say you are... the tangle,” he said carefully. “The knot.”

“A shade king?”

He looked triumphant to have finally been understood. “Yes!”

“I’m really not.” Orsina sighed. Whatever she was, it wasn’t anything great and powerful. She wasn’t royalty of any sort, not even the kind that lived in rot and sewers. The shades within her did not function as one creature, though she supposed that in a sense they were all tangled. And she was the tangle.

With little more than a huff of breath, her companion launched himself up into the saddle. “It is what they say.”

“Well, they should know better.” Orsina was nearing the end of her reserves of energy. As pleasant and distracting as conversation was, her time in a coma had not been sleep; it had been an endless trial, and now she found herself left to pay the piper even though it was other minds waging war with her as the battlefield. “Whoever they are.”

The wyvern was the wingless sort, sleek and shining in the sunlight, it wheeled on its hind legs before settling her new friend in place beside her once more. He looked like he was ready to depart, just like everyone else in the camp. Up there on his lizard’s back, he looked as though he had merely paused as he went about his duties. For all that he spoke of having no fear of repercussions, he clearly did not wish to suffer them. “They don’t. None of us do. None of us have seen the thing we hunt. But he will know.”

Orsina forced herself up to her feet to speak with him. “Who?”

“Konus.”

She blinked. “Konus is still alive? The way you were telling your story, I thought this was ancient history.”

He shrugged, and the wyvern shimmied its vestigial wings in sympathy. “It was long before any of us were born that he came down from the ice.”

“Then how could he...” Orsina was trying to calculate the age of this mythical figure, but she had no dates to work from, and the Arazi did not strike her as the sort of folk to keep a calendar.

“Aslinda-dragons, they do not age.” He smiled at the thick-plated brute of a creature still glowering at her as though they were old friends. “When humans bond with them, they share that with us.”

“Wait, so... you’re still following the same person who...”

He shrugged his shoulders, and there was another shuffle of scales and feathers, this time running down the length of the wyvern. “Time is different for the aslinda. They are... life. Creatures of life. It does not fade in them. That is why it is an abomination to take their life.”

She let out a sigh. “No wonder you hate me so much.”

“Yes, even if you aren’t the king, you are abominable.” He smirked. “That is why we are treating you so poorly.”

She cast her gaze around her cage for any real sign of mistreatment. They had locked her up, of course, and there was a guard posted to kill her, which wasn’t particularly friendly. But if one

of the Arazi had been taken captive by Espher, she couldn't imagine they'd have legs left to stand on. Finally her gaze settled on... "The bucket."

"The bucket," he replied solemnly.

Even the slowest moving of the thunder lizards seemed to be in motion now, heading off in the direction that must have been north. Slowly but surely, the town of skins and staves had broken down and wandered off without her.

Tearing her mind away from memories of the awful bucket, she asked. "When are we leaving?"

"They will come and get you last, I think. Once all else is done."

She stared at the beast beneath him with mounting discomfort. Trying to imagine what it would be like to climb on the back of one, to feel it shifting between her legs as they moved. She'd barely been on a horse before, let alone something with teeth out of primordial nightmare. At least the worst a horse could do was kick you or throw you. "Will I have to ride on one of your wyverns?"

For the first time her new companion had the good grace to look vaguely embarrassed. "I think you will be taken on... him."

Their eyes turned to the great dragon where it still lay with its face by her cage. Acrid smoke drifted up from its nostrils, as though somewhere deep inside a fire was being stoked.

"Oh no."

The Arazi gave her a grimace of sympathy, then went looking at the dark clouds for silver linings that weren't there. "You have not always dreamed of flying?"

"Flying is fine." Orsina latched onto that. It was true. She'd rarely had much time to think about it while she was doing it, her focus almost always being on the myriad things trying to kill her while she was in flight, but the actual experience was exhilarating. "I like flying. But..."

"You do not like dragons?"

There was another tangle of a question that she didn't know how to answer. So, she sidestepped it neatly.

"The idea of being tied up and flung on the back of one, miles in the sky... it doesn't sound like a good time. And the rider... he's not... polite like you."

The aforementioned dragon-lord was making his way through the thinning crowd to where Orsina stood, and her new friend was getting ready to make himself scarce.



“Hah. Polite? I am my mother’s disgrace.”

She smiled at him. “Well, you can tell your mother that your manners were good enough for an abomination.”

“She will be delighted!”

## 11 - When Kings Lay Down Their Crowns

### *Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112*

Artemio woke with a start. The last time he had dwelled in this particular room within the palace of Covotana, he had been woken by an assassination attempt. Such a history had a tendency to make for shallow sleep, and every creak and groan of the ancient wood had him reaching for his sword before his eyes had even opened.

Despite ample opportunity, he had not been attacked at any point through the night. The castle was full of enemies, but not one had set foot in the room. And if he were to have been attacked, he had protections in place that would have seen him through. Bisnonno Fiore, the last Volpe king, was still with him, his shade a constant presence whether Artemio invoked him or not. He scarcely needed to be fed life here. A second drained away from Artemio every so often, but here in this place where Fiore had lived and died, his presence was so potent that it was scarcely required. So through the night, the old king watched over the boy who would be king, if the ambassador had her way.

Now that the initial rush of terror had worked its way through his system, he lay there in his bed, looking up at the discolored portrait looming over the bed, and let his mind do what it did best: frantically scour through all that he had learned in search of connections.

There were two obvious reasons for Modesta to wish for him to sit the throne.

To win the loyalty of Espher's ruler, and to break Espher's defenses. If the kings lived and returned to rally their forces, having Artemio set against them might have swayed enough of the army outside of the wall to weaken them beyond the point of being able to break the siege. If the kings did not live, then in all honesty Artemio could think of no good reason that he should not take his place as ruler of Espher. Given the alternatives, he could not help but think of himself as the superior choice. Most of the others in the running would take to ruling like a hog to muck, but that did not mean that they were in any way the right choice for the kingdom. It was only latterly in the Cerva's reign that he had become convinced that they had what it took. And then they had gone and undone whatever trust he might have had in their abilities by fleeing the city instead of defending it.

So, he found that his choice was predicated upon a point on which he had absolutely no information. Though he had succeeded in making contact with his network of spies in the guise

of the Last King when meals were brought to these chambers and set them to work undermining the invasion in every way that he could conceive of, the fate of the Cerva twins remained a mystery to him. Whatever had happened in the palace in the hours leading up to their supposed departure, it had happened out of sight of the servants.

That was a mystery in itself.

Nothing went unobserved in a palace. There were servants whose duty it was to attend to every minuscule detail of the king's life, and while there had been some degree of obscuring thanks to the Cerva's switching back and forth, a crown-prince wouldn't have been the recipient of any less observation and care. There would not have been a moment of any day that Canticle or Madrigal went unseen. Yet somehow neither one of them had been observed by any of their usual servants. Which in turn left Art with two more equally unappealing possibilities: They had been hidden away somewhere none of the servants had access to, which was practically impossible, or the servants had sold them out to Agrant.

The latter seemed infinitely more likely. Money could turn any peasant's head. When it looked like a regime was changing, it rarely paid to remain loyal to the dead. Even the queen's own household servants, such as they were, had been selected for her from those with an affiliation to their southern neighbors.

But if they had given themselves over to the ambassador and were now singing her tune and hers alone, what possible advantage was there in keeping him in the dark? If the kings were dead, did she fear that he would have tried to avenge them? She knew him well enough to know that he was not superstitious about the spilling of royal blood. The truth would out eventually, it always did. But if he claimed the throne and the kings remained alive, then Agrant had managed to break the bond of trust required for him to command Espher's armies without spilling a drop of blood.

The only way that it made sense was if the kings lived and she was trying to play him. Trying to force his hand and create that rift. The entire setup made sense only if the kings lived, or if she was telling the truth and genuinely didn't know. It would have been more believable if she'd lied, one way or the other, because that at least would have given him some clear direction in which to jump.

By introducing both possibilities, she made his reaction to the situation unpredictable. Knowing either way would have locked him into a certain response, but removing that certainty

left him paralyzed. It prevented him from making decisive action. All that this enforced confusion bought her was time. Why was Modesta playing for time?

Reinforcements must be on the way. If she could keep the city until they arrived, she would win herself a stranglehold on Espher. If she could keep him frozen, then she would be able to prevent the siege from breaking until it was too late. Trapped between an army and the walls, his own troops would be crushed.

But the truth would out. There would be no guarantee that he could not discover the truth and make his decision immediately based upon that. There was no guarantee that he would not simply cast the whole problem aside, return to his army, and bring down the walls. It was all a gamble, and he did not believe that Modesta was the sort to gamble with her life on the line.

Which meant that no matter the truth, or the outcome, she had to be predicting a win for Agrant.

If he took the throne and the kings were dead, she won by being the one to put him there. Even if he was disobedient, there would always be the suspicion that Agrant was his kingmaker in the minds of his own subjects. The authority of the crown would be diminished, sovereignty would be wounded, bleeding strength to the emperor in the south.

If he took the throne and the kings lived, she won by fomenting rebellion and crippling Espher's ability to stand against external foes.

If he denied the throne and the kings were dead, she won. Espher would descend into scabbling lordlings all trying to portion up their part.

If he denied the throne and the kings lived, they would return as toothless as Modesta had said. The kings who'd abandoned their throne. Whatever threat they might have posed would be removed.

Yet not all of these prizes would be of equal value. She may have engineered the situation to a degree, but she did not control everything, and it seemed that she did not control one of the most important factors in this whole situation. Whether or not the twin kings lived.

To Artemio's mind there could be no question that reinforcements were already on the way to the occupation forces. Either by Modesta's design or because she had been cut off from contact by his siege. If she truly was Espher's champion in the court of Agrant, then her enemies would have been capitalizing upon her silence to demand more forces be deployed. If she was

lying, then she would have requested reinforcement herself, now that she had won such a prize as Covotana.

This meant that time was short. Whatever decision he meant to make, he needed to make it soon. So, he faced a whole new paralysis. The one that had held him throughout all of yesterday's boredom and silence. To act or to not act, in the hope that more information would make its way to him. Did he believe the Cerva twins lived or were dead?

His little minions in the cult beneath the streets had done their part, but he had access to an entirely different quality of sources.

For all that they were the most powerful people in Espher, neither one of the kings had a particularly large habitat. They did not even have the full run of the palace for the most part. The majority of it was hidden from view, just as the secret apparatus of any functioning noble household was unseen by those who benefited from it. That was how the Last King's rebels had passed so invisibly into the homes of their victims. The commoner was unseen even when they were in plain sight. Yet still they occupied space, and space had to be set aside for their duties. Beyond all those corridors and rooms frequented by them, there was so much more to the palace, entire wings that were sealed up more often than not, built for some ancient king's mistress or some beloved ambassador in the style of the time, now covered in sheets and dust. When you got down to it, encompassing the various rooms where they entertained guests, ate meals, and performed such duties as required the actual presence of a king, you could count the locations on two hands.

A king loomed large in the hearts and minds of his people, even a king with such mixed feelings from the general populace as the Cerva. If one of them had been struck down, Artemio had little doubt they would become a shade, lingering on, just as his own grandfather did. All he would have to do was come close, and he would know for certain if a king had died.

With a wave of his hand, he dismissed Fiore and rose from the bed to face a day far busier than the last, if he had anything to say about it. There was no light in this cell, so it may have been before dawn or midmorning by the time that he flung the door open and startled the saint stationed outside. Confusion briefly broke through the solemn expression that they all wore before Artemio was past him, nodding and murmuring, "Good day," as he went.

The moment of uncertainty was all that was required to have him falling into step behind Artemio instead of trying to block his path. It wasn't a trick that was liable to work twice. "I assume the ambassador is holding court in the throne room?"

The poor saint mumbled out, "The ambassador said..."

He cut the man off as they went, politely ignoring his weak grasp of the language. "The throne room or the Teatro? Which is it?"

They made it another corridor before the Agrantine swordsman bumbled out, "Tay Ah Tro?"

"Very good, your Espheran is coming along well." Artemio stopped to clap a hand on the man's shoulder, making him flinch. "I'm most impressed. Was that your answer or were you simply sounding it out?"

He made a second attempt at gaining control of the situation. "The ambassador said that you were to..."

"She can say whatever she likes directly to me if you'd be so kind as to tell me..." They rounded another corridor, and for the first time, Art caught a glimpse of someone who wasn't wearing Agrantine colors in the hall. She still wore black, but it was a maid's simple blacks rather than the aggressively pious sackcloth robes. "Oh, never mind."

He jogged the last few steps and called out to the servant. "Excuse me, miss, is the ambassador holding court in the throne room?"

Her eyes darted from him to the saint and back. Obvious trepidation marked her expression. "Yes, m'lord."

"Splendid." He clapped his hands. "And could you have someone attend to my room? The usual maid didn't turn up."

She bobbed into a curtsy. "At once, m'lord."

There was no point in sneaking about. If Modesta meant for this to be his palace, then he was going to treat it as such. He had been so lost in his own thoughts, plans, and plots that the reality of what she was offering had passed him over. Forget the long-lasting implications, she could not demand that he be king and then treat him like anything less. It would destroy all credibility her offer held.

The doors were flung open before him by the heralds, who he couldn't help but notice had not lost their jobs when their previous employer vanished. He supposed that like him, their loyalty was to Espher, or at least to the palace, rather than any particular ruling family. Back

when the Volpe family were bloodily deposed, he supposed that the staff had simply switched sides then too. He tried very hard not to hold such things against people, but that was presumably why if you were to scratch the surface of his guilt mask you'd find rage burning bright beneath.

The room fell silent as he entered. Lesser nobles were lined up to swear fealty to Agrant, interspersed with merchants and their ilk, who would have traded away all of Espher for more gold in their pockets. The type who when confronted with the existential threat of the Arazi had immediately begun working out appropriate pricing for dragon-feed.

If he were to take the throne, the population of courtiers would find itself in rapid decline. Those coming to seek the king's wisdom would find that they were offered practical solutions, and those who came to make demands would learn all too swiftly why a king's time was not to be trifled with. The thought gave him brief pause before he walked past the full line of supplicants to face Modesta where she sat upon the ivory throne. If a tyrant was what was required to make Espher work, then he'd bear the mantle gladly.

Trying to maintain that same demeanor, he barely dipped his head in greeting while his knees strained from not bending. "Good day to you, Ambassador Modesta."

By contrast, she leapt to her feet and immediately dropped into a curtsy. "Your Majesty, would you care for a seat?"

The pair of them looked at the throne for a long moment. What a sight that would have been for the people of Espher to see, her standing up from the throne and offering it to him. Exactly what they'd discussed in private now brought out for all to see. There was no response that ended well for him, so he ignored the whole thing. "I wondered if I might borrow you for a conversation at some point?"

She pressed her hands together in delight. "You have come to your decision then?"

The delight faded just as swiftly. "It is a work in progress."

"It appears that the duty of maintaining the kingdom remains upon my shoulders then." She sighed and sank back down into the throne, looking out across the crowded chamber. "Would you care to join me for lunch?"

"I'd be delighted." He smiled, and it barely even felt forced. A private conversation was what he wanted, after all. "In the Royal Dining Hall perhaps?"

Modesta threw back her head and laughed. It was deep and throaty, and it carried all the way to the back of the room. There were words hidden in it: "Let all of them see how you amuse me."

How we have high regard for each other and enjoy the other's company." The sultry edge to it would have implied a romantic dalliance as well. To those with an ear for it. She meant for the two of them to be bound together as clearly in the kingdom's mind as him and the queen. If she wasn't intent on supplanting the queen entirely. Finally, it wound down. "Do you hope to find your king hiding under the tablecloth?"

He gave her as placid a smile as he could muster. "At this point in my life, I sincerely doubt that it would even surprise me."

As it turned out, there was little time to waste after he had extricated himself from all the onlookers and well-wishers in the throne room. None of them seemed to be entirely clear on what they were congratulating him for. A few may have mentioned his victory in the north, but the vast majority seemed to believe that he had achieved something more important here in the city. If pressed, he was sure they would answer what precisely that was, but that would have left him in the awkward position of having to openly deny his intentions to sit the throne when just a little more information might render that untrue. It would not do for there to be any confusion in this matter after his coronation, if that was the choice he made, so instead he let himself be carried along on their redundant praise without prying deeper.

Artemio only knew about the royal dining chambers from the whispers in his mind from Bisnonno Fiore. He had never even come close to the kings' living quarters in his previous visits to the palace, and that was precisely how the guards liked it. However much faith the Cerva may have had in him, it could not counterbalance the danger of his blood in the eyes of those stoic defenders. He had never been invited into their wing of the palace, nor had he ever expected to be.

Fiore guided his steps, up the long spiral stairs, along the tapestried galleries, through a door that stuck after heavy rain and normally took the servant putting a shoulder to it to open up the next set of corridors. He could feel the weight of the crown on his brow when he channeled the old king. Felt the weight of the kingdom on his shoulders. His trust in the old boy had faltered of late. Where before he had considered his grandfather to be as reliable a companion as his own dear sister, now there was a deliberate distance placed between them.

Fiore had betrayed him. When he'd called on his shades to fight his father, the old king had intervened. It was the instinct of a father to protect his child, and in any other circumstance, Artemio was sure he would have forgiven him in an instant. But because Fiore was a shade, it



introduced a philosophical conundrum. In Septombra, they had been taught that shades were not people, that they were merely echoes of the person who had died to create them. Trace memories woven through with their psycho-geographical presence. Capable enough as tools but lacking the agency of the living. What Fiore had done smacked of independent thought. Which meant that at any moment, when Artemio was relying upon any one of his shades to act according to their purpose, he might find that they now didn't feel like it. Given that he was reliant upon them in life-or-death situations, this was a concern. Add in the moral quandary of enslaving sentient beings and the whole practice of shade binding became... ambiguous.

It was almost a relief to turn his attention outwards as he strolled into the royal suites. If they had been disturbed since their owners departed, Artemio could see no sign of it. Even the maids had declined to dust. He'd wondered if perhaps Modesta might have moved herself in, but it seemed that she still maintained her sleeping quarters elsewhere. It made little sense for that elsewhere to be the embassy, but he supposed she probably already had an allocated room somewhere in the palace as a valued member of court, just as he did. Though hers probably had windows.

It was almost a surprise to realize that the saint from his room was still following at his heels. He would have assumed that at some point he would have taken a hint and gone on his merry way, but it seemed the ambassador was insistent on keeping an eye on him at all times. Given that he had turned himself over willingly and given no indication of an intention to escape, this meant only one thing to Artemio. There was something in the palace that she did not want him to find out about. To his mind, that could only mean the truth about the Cerva was here somewhere, just waiting to be found.

He closed his eyes, stilled his breath, and let his other senses roll out through the room.

There were wards worked into the stone of the palace, doubled or even tripled here where the royals took their rest. Shades that had been bound in stone, with no purpose but to prevent any other from passing through. Layers upon layers of them. Artemio could feel them all around, like a leaden weight pressing down on him, and more important, upon those who were within him.

At his back, where the saint stood, was a hollow place. More than just the saint himself seeming to have no soul within him, he blocked all sense that Artemio could have gotten from the walls behind him. He was more than just absent; he was a void.

With a press of concentration, the vague outline of a man grew more fuzzy, some glimmer of life stirred in the darkness, but as Artemio's senses crept lower, closer to the sword on his belt, it was again like staring out into a starless night.

He set that aside for now. He was here to look for dead kings, not to examine the star-metal swords of the Agrantine or puzzle over the damage they seemed to be wreaking upon his enemy's spirits. He pushed out into the room, feeding out a trickle of life, like an angler casting out bait. He let it spread with his senses, the tantalizing tickle of power. Enough to bring the faded ones back from the edge of oblivion, to tease out any shade still lingering here. He swished it back and forth as he walked deeper and deeper into the suite, past the dining room where he'd been directed, ignoring the saint-guards that still trailed at his heels doing nothing to stop him but implying by their presence that he was doing something that he was not meant to be doing. Next there would come a cavalcade of coughs and grumbles, until eventually one of them managed to muster up the courage to break the barrier of polite silence and demand that he return to where he was meant to be going. His own personal saint, who was still trailing along behind him like a shadow in his black robes, was clearly closer to the end of his patience than the ones Artemio's presence had gathered from the hallway. It seemed he had already developed a tickle in his throat.

Through their connection, Artemio pulsed out a demand to his least trustworthy of shades. His grandfather stirred after so long hearing not a word from his heir apparent, stiffly, as though he'd been roosting for too long, even though his actual presence had been invoked mere hours before. "Seek out your usurper's heirs."

Any of his shades could have been set to the task, but with his dawning understanding of Bisnonno Fiore, he felt that the old king was the best suited to the task. There had always been hints of independent thought in shades, something that the House of Seven Shadows instructors had jokingly referred to as flavors. A fire spirit would more readily undertake tasks of destruction. An old soldier would more gladly swing a sword than a ploughshare. Somewhere between the characteristics of the creature that unleashed the shade and the meaning that people attached to it, you found the thing's nature. And to be fiercely protective of the Volpe line to the point of preventing it from wielding power against itself would inherently mean a hatred of the Cerva.

If the Cerva were dead, then Fiore would see to it that they never returned in any form. They were royal enough to fit within the vague remit of his being, which meant that they could be consumed to strengthen him. It was the normal way that shades in the wild grew in power, condensing and consuming all similar shades until only the greatest of them remained, an amalgam of all who had come before. Artemio supposed that when his father died, Fiore would have swallowed the old bastard's spirit down involuntarily. A family member devoted to bringing the House of Volpe back to the throne was as good a fit for him as any crown-wearing stranger. United by their commonalities, Artemio doubted that Fiore had even realized what it was eating, only that it was a viable source of lingering life that didn't require draining the only living heir to the line. Funny how Fiore became an it when Artemio thought of it as a shade, but a him when he thought too much of him as the man he'd been.

There had been closed doors in the royal suite. Probably untouched since the kings had departed for the last time. When Fiore was unleashed, every one of them burst open. The candles in the overhead chandeliers fluttered and died, leaving only the lace-filtered sunlight to bathe the rooms in a cool light. The saints at his back moved right past polite coughing and pointed comments to drawn blades.

He did not hear them, but he heard the silky sound of swords being pulled and turned to face them with his hands held up and empty. "Gentlemen, there is no need for that."

The three saints stood with steel out in the open, eyes flitting from him to each other. Well, two of them did. The third only had eyes for Artemio. Glowering eyes. It was this one that hissed something out in Agrantine, one of the few words Art had picked up. "Witch."

There were tenets in the Agrantine faith regarding the use of magic, and in particular the form of magic so widely practiced in Espher. Necromancy, they called it, though to Artemio's mind it should have been necrotheurgy, as very little divination was done with the spirits of the dead that were summoned.

If anyone had the misfortune of being born Shadebound a little south of Espher's border, they could have expected an extremely gruesome and painful future, although not one that was particularly long. Fire and needles would have featured heavily in the weeks after a Shadebound was discovered, as would a variety of special metal devices that it was said their God Emperor had designed himself for the specific purpose of purging the evil from their spirits. The efficacy

of these devices was unknown, given that nobody survived them long enough to report back on how pure their spirit had become.

“I think you at least knew I was Shadebound before you were assigned to watch me. There would be no good reason for it to be a saint otherwise, would it?”

Art’s personal stalker’s lips had thinned to a line. It was funny how they’d all looked alike with their shaved heads and robes right up until now, when the distinctions among the three men could not have been clearer. Artemio’s room guard was taller than the other two by an inch or so; the murderous one still sported bushy eyebrows despite shaving everything else to the bone, as was the Agrantine saints’ wont; the last had broken his nose at some point. Presumably before he became a master of the martial arts. Breaking it afterwards probably would have been quite a bit trickier.

The saint Artemio had come to think of as his own turned his eyes from Art to his companion at the very same moment that bushy brows leapt forward. One saint sprang forward to intercept the other. Slapping his thrust off course so Artemio wasn’t run through. Wouldn’t do for the king of Espher to be killed by an Agrantine saint without explicit orders. Of course, he supposed that if he died, then Modesta would simply find the next most likely candidate to slap on the throne and call it a day. It would be more difficult for her, what with the absence of any rightful heirs lurking in the wings, and the lack of loyalty from the majority of the nobility to one another more or less guaranteed that whoever she left on the throne wouldn’t be there the next time she looked. Still, it was something to bear in mind as he negotiated his way through life behind enemy lines. He was not entirely indispensable, so he would have to take care not to do stupid things like blast open the doors and blot out the lights with a single foolish move. At least not in front of any twitchy guardsmen.

Art leapt to the side as the saints tumbled by, his attacker still trying to lash out despite having been picked up off his feet. Whatever else could be said of the star-metal blades of the saints, there could be no denying that they kept an edge well. His waistcoat and shirt parted, and were it not for the small amount of whalebone structure that had been built into the waistcoat to make it extra stiff and uncomfortable, it was likely his skin would have been split too.

The two tumbled out into the parlor proper, blades twisting to meet each other before either man had fully regained his feet. They fought on their backs, then coming up on their knees, then finally in hunched positions. Blade ringing on blade. Spinning so fast from strike to parry and

strike that Artemio could scarcely follow the motion of it. He took a staggering step towards the remaining saint, and it only took him a moment to realize what a mistake he had made.

Thinking that the wicked necromancer was coming after him next, after turning the minds of the other saints against each other, he took a swipe at Art too. The whalebone did not take the blow for him this time. Bisnonno Fiore rushed between them to catch the blade.

Any normal swordsman would have found their sword stopping dead in the air, they would have felt the chill in that dead air permeating the metal and frosting up the blade until their hand burned and they had to drop it. This was not a normal swordsman nor a normal sword. Contact with the meteoric steel could kill Fiore as surely as it would Art himself, and he was not yet willing to make that sacrifice. He would not give up one of the cornerstones on which he had built his power for so small a thing as a cut. In one spiritual motion, he hauled Fiore back inside himself and unleashed the forge spirit, not on the saint, on whom the power would have broken like waves upon a rock, but on the floor beneath his feet.

In other parts of the palace where the comfort of the residents had mattered less, there were solid stone flagstones. In those places where it mattered the most to impress, there were great slabs of white marble. Here in the airy chambers where the kings did most of their actual living, there were floorboards, finely sanded and oiled down so there was no risk of rot or splinters in his Majesty's feet. A suspended floor was an unusual enough feature in keeps of this size that Artemio had noted it when he walked in. He just wished that he had also noted what was on the floor beneath these chambers. Whatever it was, it had to be better than being split from gizzard to spleen.

In a plume of abrupt smoke, he disappeared through the hole in the floor, sizzled through the plaster roof of the room below, and then plummeted. The next room beneath the royal quarters wasn't there. Down below, Artemio could see the rapidly approaching plaster roof of another room, but here in what should have been prime palatial real estate, the Cerva had constructed a void space.

Any attempts to circumvent the guards by entering their chambers from below would have been doomed to failure unless their would-be assassins had a premonition to carry along a twelve-foot ladder.

Artemio hit the plaster roof below and burst straight through with barely any slowing. He supposed that the done thing would have been to scream all the way down, but he'd long lost the

habit of raising his voice, even in the face of mortal peril. The last petals of flame that he'd been projecting beneath him licked out to touch the furnishings of the next chamber down. Another bedroom, exceedingly well appointed in a manner that spoke less of the gaudy gold-leaf fashion of the newly wealthy and more of the old, long-lasting wood that had defined previous generations' ideas of luxury. Furniture built for your great-grandchildren to still enjoy. Hopefully they would not enjoy it any the less for the char marks that he had left on them as he fell.

Fiore tried to catch him before he hit the ground, absorbing some portion of his momentum, but not nearly enough, though passing through the dead old king had a helpful numbing effect so Artemio didn't feel the impact quite so much—at least for the first few moments before he finally managed to struggle in a breath, and the pain blossomed all across his side. He'd landed half on the floor and half on a chest. And he couldn't say whether the flagstones or the curvature on the top of the box had hurt more.

Ribs were definitely cracked, if not broken. His side seemed to have taken the brunt of the hit. If he'd had half a moment to prepare, then he doubtless could have called on some other shade to protect him from the impact, but as it turned out when he was plummeting through an unexpected void space, his mind had gone equally unexpectedly blank. Groaning, he half slithered, half crawled his way across to the door and made sure it was secure.

He'd made it out without killing any of the Agrantine. That would come in helpful when convincing them that he had not actually intended an escape, merely to open the doors and air the place out. Assuming he could get anyone to listen long enough without trying to murder him.

Which version of the tale was told to Modesta would doubtless depend upon which of the brawling saints above survived. With luck, the most aggressive of the three had been dealt with promptly and the other two had managed to reach some sort of impasse. If the two hostile ones had paired up to slay the other, then he wouldn't be waiting for Modesta to come knocking. He turned his gaze to the hole in the roof. It wasn't particularly satisfying. If he fell through a plaster ceiling, there should have been an Artemio-shaped hole left behind rather than the rather ragged circle up there.

If they came down, then his defender was dead. If they walked around to knock on the door, some other balance had been struck.

There was nothing so unpleasant as waiting. Pain, violence, and fear were all terrible in their way, but they lasted only so long as they lasted, and then they were gone. Dread could last a

lifetime. It could haunt your dreams and stalk your thoughts and poison any happiness that you might have felt. Even when any given doom was fulfilled, the dread still lingered in the knotted muscles of his shoulders, in the tremor of his hands, in the way his eyes darted. If they were coming, he wished they would just come.

The moments ticked by, each one as long as an hour spent in study. He dared not start on any fresh plan for escape without knowing which way Modesta would jump. It was apparent to him that she needed him, both to resolve her issue of lineage and to dissolve the army at her gates, but inadvertently he had created something of a test for her resolve. How badly did she need him?

The windows were an option of course. There would be an awful distance to scale down the side of the building, considerably more than his stamina would allow for, and he'd be wide open to crossbow fire from below, but perhaps some sort of crabwise shuffle before they realized where he had gone would allow him to re-enter through another window and then make his way down through the palace proper, guided by the old king. If he'd been certain of what was coming, he could have blasted his way out into the halls and run like hell before an alarm was raised, but that ran too contrary to his nature.

Not the part about acting swiftly and decisively. He had a handle on both of those by this point in his life. The part where he turned tail and ran was the cause for his delay. He wasn't sure he could stomach it, whether it was the wisest course or not. Even back on the battlefield, he had felt a sense of relief when the Arazi were encircling him because it eliminated retreat as an option. Certainly, it had spurred the Espheran army on when they might have broken and run in the face of the ruin that true dragons could rain down upon them, but on a personal level, it meant that Artemio no longer had to consider it as a tactical option, and that was a massive relief to him, even if it should have been a source of dreadful anxiety.

So, he waited for the better part of an hour until a gentle knock came on the door. "Duke Volpe, I would like to apologize for my men. Would it relieve you to know they have been disciplined?"

He let out a soft sigh of relief, muffled by his hand so that it could not be heard beyond this room. Lowering it, he decided to be the bigger person and make things easier for her. "Not fatally, I hope. It was a momentary lapse in judgement. On my part as much as theirs. It did not even occur to me that I would cause such distress by simply opening some doors."

“The saints in question will no longer be serving within the palace, as it seems a poor fit for their temperaments.” Modesta’s voice was almost soft compared with its usual richness and potency. She was clearly suppressing a great deal of emotion. And Artemio would wager that emotion was fury at her underlings’ incompetence. “Is that acceptable?”

He forced a smile onto his face in case she could hear that he was not wearing one. His father had been able to do that. Even with his back turned. “Absolutely ideal. My thanks to you.”

For a moment the two of them stood on either side of the door, waiting.

Modesta broke the silence. “I believe that so long as we are careful of the damaged area, the royal suite is still available to us. Might I interest you in resuming our lunch arrangement?”

His head had been spinning off down a dozen new paths, many of which had involved it no longer being attached to his body, so it was almost a relief to drag himself back to the more familiar mystery of the kings’ fate. “Yes, that is probably for the best.”

There was another long pause, then the ambassador asked, “I don’t suppose that door is locked from the inside?”

Art didn’t groan, but it was a near thing. “I’m afraid not.”

“That may present an issue.” He was almost certain he had heard her groan, though it might have been one of her courtiers reflecting the look on her face. “Are you quite comfortable to wait while we locate the key holder?”

He glanced towards the hole in the ceiling. “Perhaps I should just make my way back and meet you up there? Assuming the gentlemen from earlier have now departed.”

“I can assure you they are gone.” There was that pronounced softness again. She was genuinely furious. He mattered to her enough to pierce the cloak of professional distance that she kept from everyone. He must have been central to her schemes. “It is quite a distance, and I am in no hurry. Are you certain you can manage?”

“I have help.” His smile felt a little more genuine this time around. “But thank you for your concern.”

Then, as if to prove to himself that he could move swiftly and decisively after so long lingering there, he walked straight beneath the hole in the roof and launched. The shade of Saveria Gatto provided the force required, as though Artemio stood atop the very tip of a vast rapier being thrust straight up. The acceleration stopped just short of the blackened circle up above, and with a grace that he himself did not possess, Artemio drifted forward at the zenith of



his launch to land upon the slightly charred and dipping floorboards. Arriving safely before gravity could cotton on.

Taking in the scene of the fight was habitual at this point. The two wrestling saints had gone end over end as they fought, making it to their feet and then flinging furniture about as they tried to gain some sort of terrain advantage over the other. It looked as though the fight had carried over a chaise lounge, which, from the scratches, Artemio could tell had been tipped up onto one end. Before ultimately the third man in the room intervened, breaking them up, but not before disturbing the dust by their feet and scratching a line up the wallpaper where he raised his own sword to part theirs. To Artemio's other senses, the places where their blades had scratched were dulled, as though the mere touch of the meteoric steel was sufficient to rob the world of its vigor. The ward behind the panel that had been scratched was dead, an opening through which shades might enter now. He made a mental note to have it replaced. For the Cerva when they returned, not for himself. Probably.

Regardless of who would occupy these rooms in the future, the guards were gone now, as promised. Which meant that Artemio had the full run of the royal suite without interference, at least until Modesta made her way up two flights of stairs. Without delay, he unleashed Fiore again, setting Saveria Gatto loose to serve the same purpose while he hunted through each room in turn, straining out his senses for any hint of the twin kings even as he used his eyes and mind to piece together what he could from the scene they had left behind. Nothing was out of place, everything had been put into its allotted place, even the vast wardrobes off the bedrooms were organized tidily, and in all of his life, Artemio could not think of any other time where a foppish noble of any sort had his overwhelming plethora of different clothes so orderly. It made him think better of the Cerva again, albeit only briefly.

Peering down at the ground served no purpose either, there would be no trace of the kings' footprints here, all dust would have settled after their departure, not before. Yet he caught himself doing it once or twice, some thought nagging at the back of his head until finally he found himself giving it voice. "How long have they been gone?"

The dust lying on the floor was too thick to only have been a few days. Even assuming the kings had gone into hiding the very moment the army had marched off to war, it wouldn't have been possible for the place to become so run-down so quickly. Did they even stay here at all? If you were as assassin-averse as the Cerva, advertising one place as your sleeping quarters and

sleeping someplace else entirely made an awful kind of sense. He set it aside for now and continued his sweep of the suite of rooms, invariably turning up nothing.

If they had died, he was confident it hadn't happened here. And if they lived, he was confident they had not departed from these rooms. He found himself intensely frustrated by the whole process of elimination. The palace had more rooms than he could readily count. If he were to go through them one by one, giving them the due diligence and care required to turn up any hint to the kings' whereabouts, then it would take him the better part of a year, and that was assuming everything could have been perfectly preserved in this moment until he turned his attention to it. As it stood, all he could do was focus upon those places where it seemed the most likely to him that the kings may have been and expand the search out from there to the marginally less likely places, and then to the rest. The kings had the full run of the keep, even if politeness typically kept them contained. If they had known there was an Agrantine army on the march, then they might have holed up anywhere before making a break for it. Or they may not have fled at all, instead secreting themselves away somewhere in the palace with the intent of waiting things out or positioning themselves and their followers to take the city back.

Anything was possible, and since the people he had given his fealty to so readily had elected not to leave him a single hint as to their current whereabouts, anything would remain possible. At least for now.

By the time Modesta had arrived, he had settled himself at the table and only rose to greet her politely for a moment before sinking back down. Moving hurt, and he'd expended more effort than he'd intended scurrying around the suite while he had peace.

There was no way to avoid her noticing his wince. He did not like to show weakness before an enemy, but in this case, any injury that had been done to him was practically a point scored in whatever game they meant to play next. Her voice had returned to its usual richness when she said, "My dear Duke, I'm so very sorry for this unfortunate turn of events. I hope that all is well?"

"Just a few bruises, I assure you." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. No need for acting, the whole right side of his body seemed to be tightening up now that he had stopped moving. He would be black and blue from armpit to knee. "For all of their much-vaunted lethality, I would have expected more from your saints."

She mustered up a sympathetic smile for him. “Ah, but there were saints leaping to your defense also, were there not?”

He laughed a little too hard, and it was cut off abruptly by the surge of pain. “Are you suggesting that the one balanced the other, for a net result of no death?”

“Perhaps?” She glanced out into the foyer room, at the blackened mark on the rugs, still visible from so far off. “Though I’m sure they are not accustomed to men who can simply disappear through the floor when threatened either. You are full of surprises. Aren’t you?”

“Did you like that?” He grinned. Let her think him a fool, so pleased to turn her head. “I thought it was rather a good trick. It would only work that once of course. Afterwards, everyone and their mother would know to station a second guard on the floor below me, but it served its purpose. I’m still here, chatting away with you and wondering what sumptuous delights will be served.”

Servants had drifted into the room as they spoke, and despite himself, Artemio had fallen back into the old habit of ignoring them until it was no longer necessary to do so. It was how the Last King cult had slaughtered so many of Espher’s nobility unseen. He needed to keep closer watch, particularly now that he was injured. To his mind, many of those peasants were like wild dogs, just waiting to scavenge upon the corpse of any noble wolf that looked susceptible to their attentions. He did not want to look weak in front of them either. It would not provide him with a life expectancy beyond weeks.

The ambassador glanced around as plates were set down and silverware alongside. Sniffing at the aromas wafting up from the covered platters. She glanced about before whispering conspiratorially. “It is not politic to say so, but I must admit a preference for Espheran cuisine now that I have dwelled here for so long. When I first arrived, everything was too rich for me, of course. I spent my first week here in a constant state of nausea. But now that I have adjusted, there is much to appreciate. Wouldn’t you say?”

He looked down at his plate with a smile. Pheasant, shimmering in the sunlight and scented heavily with cinnamon. Beans in a rich broth. Fried zucchini flowers. All extremely Espheran dishes. “Unfortunately, I lack much basis for comparison. I can’t say that I’m terribly familiar with food from the south...”

“A culture founded on the principles of asceticism can create a great many things, from mighty warriors to pious devotees, but one thing that they lack for is a variety of sauces and

soups. Agrantine cuisine tends to focus less on flavor than on its sustaining properties. The most food for the smallest cost. Grand crops of grains and rice, our farmlands stretch on for acres. As far as the eye can see. Yet the quantity of produce is tempered by a lack of distinct flavors. Shall I call down to the kitchen and ask them to send up some examples?" She did not laugh aloud as she made the offer, but there was a wicked sparkle in her eye. He knew that if he said yes, she would absolutely make him endure whatever drab barley stew they subsisted on back home, yet refusing might be taken as an insult.

As tactfully as he could manage, he gave his answer. "I can't say that you've really impressed on me the reason why anyone might want to eat it, thus far."

"Efficiency, for the most part. When you have an empire spanning from one ocean to the other, it behooves you to ensure stomachs are full first and palates pleased second." She took a delicate bite, crunching into a zucchini flower, and then sighed with pleasure. "I suppose that at some time in our history we reached a turning point where such a trade no longer needed to be made, but by then all that we knew to cook was what had sustained us through darker times. Is this much like what happened here, in Espher?"

Artemio was a little perplexed. "We had constant prosperity, and it caused our tables to overflow with delights? Possibly? I can't say I've given it too much study."

"My meaning was your shades rather than your supper. Even the name of your necromancers gives answer to why your ancestors were willing to attach their souls to such monsters. To bind them. To keep them from their rampaging." She bent forward to ensure none of the sauce from her beans might spatter her dress, though Artemio doubted it showed any stains. Least of all red ones. It created a false sense of intimacy between them. As though she were speaking of something shameful. "So now it is all your people know. Is it why they hold with such archaic wickedness?"

"With respect, Madam Ambassador, I believe you have misunderstood the etymology. It is not the shades that are bound, it is I." He found that persistent spark of anger burning deep inside him. A personal insult he would have shrugged off as his due more often than not. But to have the entirety of Espher tarred with the brush of archaic wickedness was too much for him to stomach. "Just as we might say a crown-prince is throne-bound, so it is with my people. To command the dead is our birthright. They are our destiny. Our gift. We do not cling to the past

because it is all that we have ever known, we hold with traditions that have made Espher a world power since before your god had learned how to piss for himself.”

There was a sullen silence for a long moment. During which Modesta took another crunching bite of zucchini. Finally realizing that he was going to make no apology, she offered one up instead. “I apologize for the misunderstanding. Am I to take it from your rather visceral reaction that I have touched upon a taboo subject?”

“Not at all. I simply do not want there to be any misunderstanding between us.” His eyes narrowed as he pressed on, anger burning within him, no matter how he tried to deny it. How could anyone have lived in Espher for so long and still not understood one of the most fundamental things about it and its people? “I do not endure my shades as a necessary evil; I revel in the gifts that the past bestows upon me, upon Espher. It is through our mastery of these embodiments of our history and culture that we have come to rule our little corner of the world. It is our mastery of them that keeps all of your grand upstart empires from trampling over us and swallowing us up. Come rain, snow, or dragon, Espher will survive, because we are Shadebound.”

Modesta fell silent once more, but it was less a matter of shock and more one of having her mouth full this time around. Artemio joined her in working their way through the first course. It was not that the food had been delivered to his room cold in the past day, only that the volume and variety of that which had been delivered was rather lacking.

“Espher cannot endure if it no longer remains Espher,” Modesta said as she polished off the contents of her spoon. “That was more or less what you told me on your return to the city, was it not? So long as I promised you that Espher would remain a kingdom of its own, then you would accept any deal required to protect her?”

Now they were once again coming to the crux of the matter. He set his own knife and spoon down. “There is no question of it.”

“Yet I have offered you all that most men dream of, and still you decline.” She counted off his blessings upon her fingers. “A kingdom to rule, a famed beauty for a wife, the support of powerful allies for your new regime. All while guaranteeing her sovereignty. What more could you ask for?”

He could lie, of course he could lie, but he didn’t feel that he had enough talent in deception to get past the ambassador, nor could he conceive of a way to extract useful information from her

without first acknowledging what information he was seeking. So, he did that which was unthinkable in the circles that the two of them now moved in. He leaned close, and he was honest about what he wanted. “I need to know what has become of the Cerva before I make any rash decisions.”

Modesta sat back with a loud sigh. “I do not know what has become of them. Nobody does. I can assure you, that knowledge was of the foremost priority to me when my hand was forced. I have made every inquiry it was possible to make, and I have come up with no answers for you. What more would you have me do?”

“Set me loose.” His answer leapt unbidden from his mouth. “Let me look for them, let me track them down. It would help your cause to have their whereabouts known, just as it would help my own decision making.”

Modesta’s face had turned stern. “And if you do not like what you find?”

“Then wouldn’t you rather I learned it now before I sat the throne and directed all its power against you once the truth has outed?” He bit down into the meat of his pheasant with considerably more force than was strictly required. Not champing at the bit to begin his search but agitated nonetheless. “This is a city where the dead speak. Do you truly think that I will not find out eventually, with or without your assistance or leeway?”

“As you have already said, it would be in my best interests to allow you to search. Either you turn up nothing and thus are free to follow through on my plan without delay or remorse, or you find them alive and well somewhere, hiding from their duty and being a general embarrassment to the entire human race. Regardless, the truth must be sought, and as such I give you my fullest blessings and whatever authority you require to discover the truth of this matter swiftly. Is that sufficient?”

“Your blessings are appreciated.” He smiled at how easy all of this was. “But I believe that I have authority enough myself, if I am to be the king-in-waiting. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Quite. If you do intend to take up the crown?” It wasn’t quite a question, but it wasn’t not either, and apparently it had been close enough for her bizarre Agrantine speech pattern to accept it as such.

He didn’t have an answer to it yet, but the truth was obvious. He wouldn’t still be here entertaining this conversation if he wasn’t at least considering it.

They finished up that first course and a light refreshment was brought in to tide them over to the next: shaved ice flavored with pear syrup. The kind of exorbitant luxury that in other nations would have been impossible to acquire, even for most royals. Here in Espher where shades could be commanded to conjure ice from the water in the air, it was affordable enough that even a peasant was likely to taste it once or twice, during festival times.

It was very refreshing, and it set his mind back onto the task at hand. The real reason that he had asked for this meeting. “Ambassador Modesta, would you mind telling me what you do know of the king’s movements before his disappearance?”

She let out a laugh that made him uncomfortably aware that he was alone, eating a private meal in a private room with an attractive woman. A woman who seemed to cultivate her attraction in the way a warrior honed his sword. “Am I a suspect to be interrogated?”

“Not at all. I’m simply convinced that you of all people in Covotana have access to the best intelligence at this point. None of my usual contacts are currently available, what with them being outside the city walls.” There was no need to mention his conversations with the servants. Modesta wouldn’t count them as people.

“My dear, flattery is entirely unnecessary. As I have already told you, I was somewhat involved in logistical arrangements on that particular day, but it is my understanding that his Majesty withdrew from holding court in the throne room as soon as my army was sighted. From there, the castellan reports that he remained in the palace, heading to the solarium to discuss matters with his brother in private, even sending away their servants. We assume it was from there that they made their egress.”

She had taken the first meeting with them in the solarium. Already giving him a look, to see if he could pick up the trail like a good hunting dog, before they’d even begun their discussions of peace terms. It seemed that she meant to use him for anything and everything that he was good for. Thinking back, there had been no sign of any shade lurking around, nor had Bisnonno Fiore abruptly swollen with power from consuming a royal shade, so it could be assumed that no violence had been done to them there.

Of course, the very fact that Modesta was holding court there on his arrival meant it had been thoroughly cleaned and organized before he could see it, eliminating any evidence of a struggle if they had been seized there and killed elsewhere.

He gave no hint of any of this on his face. “It is certainly a good starting point to begin my search, thank you.”

If she thought he was a fool who could be used unwittingly for her purposes, then all the better.



## 12 - Fortune's Scales

### *Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112*

There were hidden cities within the city of Covotana. Towns made in miniature and hidden behind compound walls. Within a noble family's domain in the city, you might find their own baker set up in his own bakery. Their own soldiers set up in their own barracks. Stables, wells, streets, and entertainers. All of the things that made a city into a city scaled down to serve only a handful of people who were considered deserving of it. There was fierce competition among the noble houses to acquire the finest talent from among the skilled workers of Covotana, to get contracts signed and then consign them to servitude for the rest of their lives. It was a comfortable life, for those who were being consigned, and it made the already comfortable lives of those doing the acquisitions that little bit more pleasant to know that at no point would they have to step beyond the walls of their tiny city and interact with any of the world beyond.

After a morning of being jostled by crowds, ignored by people she was speaking to, and generally treated with the kind of contempt with which she had treated the common man of Covotana, Harmony was beginning to see the appeal of a private town with none of the human race intruding.

The press of bodies was precisely what she needed to make it safely past the patrolling saints or any other spies from the palace that might have seen her before, but that didn't mean she enjoyed the elbows of that press nor the pungent aroma that she often had to remind herself was actually probably originating with her, given her sewer-diving exploits.

Before she had lain down for the night, everything had hurt, but while she had dozed in fitful slumber, it seemed that her injuries had not and that they had claimed quite a bit more territory while there was nobody keeping watch. She didn't just look like a peasant or smell like a peasant, she moved like one now, limping and shying away from every contact with others. Flinching as though she were afraid to take up any room. She could not have asked for a more complete disguise, and just as it was with the press of bodies around her, she hated every moment of it despite its utility.

Technically speaking, she knew where she was going. She knew Covotana, and she was more than passingly familiar with the Anatra estate, which she had been longing to visit since she was a child to enjoy one of their famous balls. Having now successfully attended one, she

would have thought the location ever more firmly burned into her mind. Yet the version of the city that she knew, viewed through the window of a hired carriage, was not the one down here amidst the terra-cotta paving and horse-apples. She did not think the extra two feet of vantage would have changed her view so thoroughly, but she could not see the usual landmarks through all of the damned heads bobbing into her line of sight, and it seemed that actually asking any of those head owners the way to somewhere was a surefire way to get barked at.

What should have taken her an hour had taken the better part of her day so far, and she hadn't even come up with any sort of plan for actually surmounting the estate's fairly substantial walls yet. Now that she had located the place, she was encircling it slowly, trying to be as unobtrusive as it was possible for a hideous stinking beggar to be in this part of town. Which was to say, if the usual city guard had still been on duty, she would already have been bound in chains at best or on her way to the bottom of a canal at worst.

Dense ivy artfully draped across the outer walls, but it didn't take Harmony more than a moment to realize that for all that it was widely spread, it was also cultivated from fresh growth in such a way that it didn't actually hold on to the wall anywhere. It gave the appearance of ivy while offering all the assistance in climbing that you'd normally associate with clouds. If anything heavier than a sparrow put weight on it, it would tear free.

Her impression of the Anatra was not that they were particularly clever people outside of the sphere of social climbing, where they excelled, but it seemed that they did employ clever people. Which meant that any attempt at egress was liable to encounter trouble. The few places the wall seemed to dip lower, there was a shimmer of broken glass showing atop it. Anywhere that another building stood close enough that a daring leap from an upper story might have been attempted, she could hear the soft shuffling of feet in dry leaves on the other side of the wall.

The Agrantine had found no fight when they came into the city, and places like this were why. When confronted with danger, the nobility of Espher would have given any turtle a run for its money on who could retreat to safety swifter. There was probably a substantial standing army outside the city with the Anatra sigil on their shields, but some smaller, more elite, number of them would still be here, surrendering any potential glory on the battlefield for the certainty of three square meals a day and a substantial monthly stipend for entertainment.

She did not want to encounter them.

The bottom line was that these soldiers were fundamentally mercenaries, fighting not for honor or country or anything else noble of heart, but for cash. If they found her and recognized her, then she would have been as well turning herself over to the Agrantine without a fight. It wouldn't take all of them turning on her, just one who was ready to cut a new deal for prosperity. Eventually she reached a corner somewhere off behind the main villa, which had been set near the back of the estate at an angle so that none of the building and the outer wall were facing. Wouldn't want any irritating echoes. She looked around, realized that she was currently unobserved, and then grit her teeth, staring up at the tiled top of the wall. It was tall, but not so tall as to make the possibility of climbing over it ridiculous. If Art were here, he'd gust her over with one of his shades so quickly she wouldn't even have time to yelp, but he wasn't, and she was alone with only her own body and mind at her disposal. She went for the corner, running. Where the roofed stretches of wall met, there was a seam between the tiles, and if she could catch a hold on that and swing, there was a chance she'd be over and in before anyone was any the wiser.

She took a deep breath, staggered back, with every muscle in her body loudly protesting, and then she ran for it. Building momentum all the way across the street. One foot hit the wall, then the next, up above it, she ran as high as she possibly could in those two kicks before finally slamming down her heels, coiling, and then springing up.

Or at least that was her intention. What happened instead was that her hand grasped the edge of the tiling for only a moment before it gave way, and she tumbled back down into the street.

She was still lying there, bleeding from her scalp and with the detachable tile in her hand, when the guards who had been patrolling around inside came out to check on what had caused the commotion. At once, their sergeant cursed under his breath, then by his command the two lesser officers seized Harmony under the arms and hauled her up.

For a moment she thought that she could stand and fight, but the strength in her legs gave out promptly. Head wounds were a tricky thing, especially after a night of being flung around and battered off the sides of tiled pools beneath the surface of the city. Her vision kept slipping into darkness and back, everything swayed from side to side, and it was only when the pain cut through her confusion she realized it was because her eyes kept trying to close without her say-so.

“Miss? Miss, can you hear us?”

She meant to cuss them out, to demand they release her, to threaten the lot of them with gruesome violence if they laid a hand on her person, but what came out was, “Ow.”

The guard on her left arm didn't seem to even notice. “I told them. Didn't I tell them. You can't go loosening up tiles, they're going to fall. And look what happens.”

“They don't want anybody climbing over the walls,” right arm piped up.

“Then build them higher. Don't go putting a death trap for anybody walking by.”

Right arm jostled her a little, and nausea rolled through her. She'd fought dragons and dragon-lords, and if she died from falling over, she was going to be furious. “If you build them higher, people think you're scared of something,” right arm said.

Left arm yanked her a little closer, which was probably for the best because her legs might have been going through the motions of walking as they dragged her along, but they had the lost what little strength sleep had given back to them. “Know what I'm scared of? I'm scared that some poor girl will come walking by, and the tiles we loosened will come down and crack her head open.”

That shut up right arm for a moment. But eventually he mumbled out, “Look, this was just bad luck.”

“Bad luck, was it? How many times have we had to come out and replace fallen tiles? How many times a week?” Left dragged her along when one of her feet got turned under her ankle. “It wasn't luck. It was a tragedy waiting to happen.”

She felt like she should probably contribute to the conversation in some way. But the words seemed to be coming to her from a great distance away, and her ears were ringing, and it was darker than it should be for midday. “I'm... I'm all right.”

Left arm scoffed. “No, miss, you most certainly are not. You're bleeding, and you look like the Last King came knocking at your door.”

She was bleeding. There was wet running down her face, down her neck. Why hadn't she felt that before? Probably a bad sign. “Scalp. Always looks bad.”

“You're right enough, miss, but that still don't explain why you can't stand up on your lonesome, now, does it?”

She didn't have an answer for that. Art probably would have had words. Lots of fancy words. Like concussion. And brain swelling.

They passed through the gates and into the Anatra estate without a single alarm being raised, unless you counted right arm's grumbles over the top of her lulling head. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Well, I'm surely not leaving her out in the street when it's all our fault she's hurt."

Right arm's tone was gradually shifting from complaining to wheedling. "Lady Anatra will have our guts for garters, she hears we've brought some girl in." He tried to lower his voice but failed rather fantastically as he added, "Have you smelled her?"

"Don't be rude, we don't know the hardship she's endured, do we? And how's the lady going to find out exactly?" left asked very pointedly. A challenge. "Besides, it isn't like there's going to be any funny business."

She hadn't even considered the fact that she was surrounded by men and essentially powerless to defend her virtue at this point. But Harmony did what she could to defend herself. "Might throw up."

"See, hardly puts you in the mood?" Left seemed pleased to get a little support, even if it was from the quarter of an almost unconscious peasant girl.

Still right arm persisted. "Well, she can't be in the barracks. Everyone will see her."

Left snorted. "Whole bloody house is empty with the war. Let's bung her in one of the outhouses and call it a job well done."

"Better get a bucket though, in case she does go," right arm added, with the growing confidence of a man who recognized some small battle he could win, even as the war went against him. "Don't fancy explaining that to her ladyship neither."

Left bobbed his head. "Right you are."

They fell quiet for a time, or possibly, Harmony slipped out of consciousness long enough to lose her bearings and track of the conversation. Blinking hard, she caught tiny glimpses of the world outside her aching head. The greenery of the gardens. The mosaic tiles beneath her feet as she passed over places where she'd danced not so long ago. She could hear fountains for a while, then they faded to quiet. Finally, the creaking of a door being opened stirred her.

She was slumped down into a heap of sacks. Lumps shifted beneath her that she hoped were apples rather than rats. Left arm remained with her; right wandered off somewhere. Bucket. Getting a bucket in case her rising gorge finally made a break for it. She tried to speak around it, but that just seemed to encourage it to climb higher.

Left pushed her hair back from her face. The blood was already turning tacky. “Right, miss, you just settle there for a little rest. I’ll come back and check on you in a bit. Bring you a drink and whatnot.”

She managed a few words, though she didn’t seem to have any control of what they were. “Got... to go.”

“You aren’t going nowhere, miss, not until you’re seeing straight again.” His hand paused from its gentle ministrations and gave her a pat on the cheek. If she’d been anyone else, she might have recognized the tone as fatherly, but her mind substituted brotherly, slotting Art into that role. The only one to show her kindness when she was hurt or beaten down. “I’m sure whoever you’re hurrying off to meet will forgive you once they see all that blood, and no mistake.”

Darkness encroached on the edges of her vision, and she fought it back. She knew falling asleep would be bad. She knew it, just like she knew so many things, because Artemio had been rambling about them, and some bits of his rambling got stuck in her head too. “Got things to... go. People to...”

“Well, I’m sure they’ll still be there once you’re feeling better.” He put a hand on both of her shoulders, as though he was trying to stop her getting up. Stupid. She could barely stay where she was without slumping. “Just don’t go wandering, all right? If somebody spots you there’ll be trouble for us all, sure enough.”

The other one had come back to plunk a bucket by her legs. Wedging it in between them with a nudge of his foot. “I still think this is stupid.”

The brotherly guard turned on him with a snarl. “And I think I wouldn’t leave a hurt dog out on them streets with the bloody black-robos out there. Would you?”

He held up his hands in defeat. “All right. All right.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.”

Then finally the door swung shut, the blinding light of day was blocked, and blissful silence descended. Finally, all the noise was over, and she could get some rest. Harmony let her aching head loll back against the rough fabric of the sacks and closed her eyes.

No. That was wrong. Her eyes snapped open again, though just keeping them open hurt. Sleep was the enemy. Sleep would kill her. She had to remember. Even though trying to remember anything, focus on anything, was utterly hopeless. Orsina. She needed to remember

why she was here. What she was doing. She had to know. If Orsina was dead, then maybe she could just lie down and let this all be over, but so long as there was hope, she was not going to go quietly into the dark.

So, she sat up, and threw up, and hurt. All three of those steps took markedly longer than she would have thought possible, as though time itself had ground to a halt to politely remind her that perhaps lying down and dying might be the preferable option at this point. She didn't listen. Time, her body, all of it could shut the hell up. Pushing herself to standing, she swayed dangerously, feet shuffling about to find stability. Up was clearly a bad idea. Everything felt so much worse when she was upright. It was as though she'd shoved her head into a cloud of nausea that had been lingering over her. Her stomach convulsed, but there was truly nothing left to bring up.

Step by step she crossed the reeds laid out on the floor to reach the door. Inch by inch, she hauled it open, slow as she could, so as to keep the hinges from creaking. Peering out, she could distantly see the central villa through the shrubberies. She was in some storage hut set away from the main house and the major paths. She was inside the compound, past the guards, guards who now had a vested interest in not drawing attention to her. It was the absolute best-case scenario, and she loathed how easy it had been because she'd earned none of it. Unless you were a believer in some sort of luck balance, in which case she was likely owed a great deal more good fortune to make up for the past day or so.

She kept her hand on the wall as she left the storage hut, it was more vital to her balance than keeping her eyes open, as her eyes continually seemed to wander sideways and try to lead her astray. Kagan was here, somewhere, locked up in one of the lesser chalets secreted around the estate. She wished she'd paid more attention when he was being relocated from the palace. As it was, she was going to have to scout them all out.

Kagan had been too much of a liability to the war with the Arazi to be allowed to roam free, but as the impresario to one of their most impressive Shadebound, he could no longer be confined to a cell. This holiday on an ally's estate had been the best compromise that could be reached.

Stealth was beyond her at this point, even continuing to move under her own power was something of a stretch. So long as she maintained her focus, everything was fine, but the moment she gave in to the fuzzy fog that was intent on swallowing her up, she would topple like a puppet

with cut strings. She lost count of how many times she had fallen as she meandered about the place. Every impact sent another jolt shooting straight up into her aching skull.

By any rational logic, it should have been making her feel sicker each and every time, but through some awful crossing of connection in her brain, it seemed to be bringing the world back into sharper focus each time she rose. Perhaps it was just the gradual recovery that time brought with it, but she couldn't help but feel as though she were gradually jolting her brain back into the correct position.

The first two chalets that she came across were a bust. No sign of habitation, no sign of much of anything really. They'd been cleaned out and the doors left wide to air them out after. Despite the chill crispness of the winter air, it was still dry enough for such a thing, and there was no fog, no matter what her senses kept on trying to tell her. It was only when she set off along a winding path to the rear of the property that she finally hit on some luck. The next chalet wasn't just closed, it was closed up. All the shutters locked in place. The doors were not barred, for the idea probably hadn't crossed anyone's mind and would have made the place look too obviously a prison. But it seemed enough like a prison to get her heart beating faster again.

She lumbered over to the wall, trailed her way along it to the door, and then, confronted with no brighter ideas, she knocked.

The silence stretched out. Agonizing beyond anything she could have imagined. To have come all this way. To have endured everything, only to meet silence now. And then there was a shuffling sound on the other side of the door.

"Isn't dinnertime yet, is it?" A baritone so deep it set the wood humming beneath her hands.

Harmony almost collapsed then and there. It was him. He was alive. Which meant that Orsina was alive. She was alive.

Her own words came clumsy, as if she were chewing on something as she tried to speak. After a couple of failed attempts, she blurted out. "Kagan?"

The silence returned, then a softer rumble. "Who's there?"

"Harmony. Harmony Volpe. Orsina's... friend."

There was a pause as he tried to remember her. "The little woman with the sword?"

She was so caught up in the joy of knowing that Orsina was alive that she couldn't even be annoyed. A laugh escaped her. "Isn't everyone little when you're nine feet tall?"

"Not many women with swords though."



She sank down and put her back to the door with a sigh. When her head lolled back to touch the wood, it sent a fresh sharp jab of pain through her. “I suppose not.”

Perhaps she drifted off again, perhaps he was just impatient. Either way he rumbled, “What do you want, Harmony Volpe?”

“I want to get you out of there,” she groaned back. “I want you to come with me, to find Orsina.”

“Where’s she gone that she needs finding?”

Harmony closed her eyes against the brightness of the sky and tried to put everything into order in her mind. “What have you already been told?”

“Somewhere between bugger and all.” There was an edge to his voice now. Frustration. She could just picture how he’d spent his last weeks. Cooped up in there with nobody telling him anything. She’d probably have been clawing at the walls. He had remarkable discipline for a giant lizard monster man.

She wet her lips, then regretted it when she tasted her own blood on them. “We fought the Arazi. We won. Orsina won. She... she carried the day.”

“Not a surprise there.” He huffed out a rough breath she took to be laughter. “Only one of you with any blood in her. That one’s stubborn as a mule. Would take more than an army of dragon-lords to stop her. Worst came to it, she’d just open that fool mouth of hers and talk them to death.”

If not for the tale Harmony had to tell, she might’ve laughed at the truth in his words. As it was, the next part took more than a little discipline on her part to repeat. Even though the moment had been playing in her head over and over since the moment she saw it. “After the fighting was done, she... she fell. The Arazi took her. They took Orsina.”

The door behind her was hauled away abruptly, and Harmony fell back into the chalet, head injury bouncing off the flagstones. Then there was a glowering dragon-lord scowling down at her roaring, “They what?”

She held up her hands, and for some reason she had a half dozen pairs, all spinning around between her and the half dozen Kagans. “They took her, I didn’t know if she was alive or dead, but they scooped her up, carried her off.”

“And you let them?!” He dropped down over her, snarling. Those huge, pointed teeth in his mouth all on display. “She’s a dragon-slayer! Do you have any idea what they do to slayers?!”

She blinked the extra images away. “Kill them?”

His jaw snapped shut, then he grumbled, “Lucky guess,” as he pushed himself back upright to tower over her some more.

“But they haven’t killed her.” She pushed herself up onto her elbows and then tried for her feet, even though she could already feel her balance slipping. “If they had, you wouldn’t be here. You’d have gone with her.”

He caught her by the shoulders before she could topple. Scowling now at the state of her. “Then whatever they’ve got planned for her has to be worse.”

It was enough to render the pair of them silent for a moment. Each one of them imagining Orsina in pain. Each one of them desperate to prevent it, for their love of her. As different as that love might have been.

Harmony managed to recover her wits first and pull back from the mental spiral that he had set them both down. “So that door has just been open this whole time?”

It was hard for a towering monster of a man covered in scales to look sheepish, yet here he stood. Exuding wooliness. “Well, your brother said to stay put.”

Freed from his grasp, she settled back down to sitting. It was easier to be lower to the ground. Crawling might have featured in her future.

Harmony rolled her eyes. “Since when does anybody listen to him?!”

Kagan’s brow furrowed, and since he was missing all the hair that would normally make up eyebrows, it mostly involved bristling scales. “Isn’t he second to the king or something?”

“I mean... yes,” Harmony conceded. “But that doesn’t mean you need to listen to him.”

Kagan snorted. “Only if I don’t want my head cut off.”

“Oh, Art wouldn’t cut your head off.” She waved away the possibility.

“No, he’d order someone else to do it.”

“No, he really wouldn’t.” She paused to think, trying to force her sluggish brain back up to speed even though thinking too loudly was giving her a headache. “Even if you weren’t bound to Orsina, he wouldn’t have...”

She trailed off for a moment, then got her mental carriage back onto the right road. “I need to catch you up to current events swiftly... We beat the Arazi, lost Orsina, and came back to find the Agrantine had taken the city.”

“Churchy folk?” Kagan settled on his haunches to be level with her. “Black robes?”

“They’ve got an empire behind them, and that empire wants Espher.”

He huffed out laughter. “Doesn’t seem like you’d be worth the trouble.”

It occurred to her then, that for all the effort she’d put into finding him, the two of them had basically never had a conversation. For all she knew, he loathed her, and Espher, with all his heart. All she really knew about him was he was so much of a criminal that his own people exiled him, and that Orsina trusted him with her life. “You don’t like it here?”

“Not what I’m saying. Too hard to take, with all the necromancers and mountains. Too expensive.”

“Well, that didn’t stop the Arazi,” she shot back.

He broke away from her gaze to look out at the carefully cultivated garden. Out here, it had been preened to look like they were in a forest, all the sound of the city softened by the canopy. Though no tree had been allowed to grow awry, everything rose parallel. “That’s different.”

She felt like she finally had some sort of advantage in the conversation. “How so?”

“The Arazi, they’re on a crusade. They’re not…” He grumbled. “It’s just different.”

She set her back to the doorframe and pushed herself upright. It hurt, of course, but there was no avoiding the pain at this point. All she had was pain to bring her world back into focus, so she may as well lean into it. “We need to get both of us out the city, unseen. Then we need to go and rescue Orsina before they can do whatever awful thing you think they’re going to do to her.”

“You’ve got to be mad.” He could barely cross his arms over his chest, the way they bulged with such huge muscles. “You want me to chase after the whole Arazi horde across the steppes to try and save one girl?”

“The way that I see it, you don’t have much choice in the matter.” Harmony shrugged. “If she dies, you die.”

“Then I’m dead.” When he leaned back against the doorframe, the whole wall creaked. “There’s no way we can get her back without a fight, and unless you’ve got an army hidden under that cloak, I’d say we’re done for.”

“I have got an army, actually,” she mentioned offhand. “The Espheran army is laying siege to the city.”

Kagan cocked his head to the side and narrowed his eyes. “And you reckon they’ll come chasing off after our lost girl?”

“No, probably not,” she conceded without a pause. “But we can ask.”

“Better not to.” He headed back into the little guesthouse, digging around for his few belongings and strapping the vast majority of them straight onto his body. He had no weapons because technically he was a prisoner, but she couldn’t help but notice that anything else he might feasibly have needed for a cross-country journey seemed to have been gathered to him. Dried meat and biscuits set aside from meals. A heavy traveling cloak. Almost as if he’d been planning for this trip. “If they’ve any brains, they’ll stop us throwing our lives away. Time spent arguing will give the Arazi even more time to get away.”

She lingered in the doorway. “So, we’re going then?”

“Like you said.” He gave her a smile. “Not much choice.”

Things passed too quickly for her to follow after that. Both because they were moving at a heady pace, and because her dazed state blurred it all together. She distinctly remembered the moment of weightlessness when he flung her up on top of the wall and the awful moment as all the tiles beneath her feet began to slide sideways to dump her out into the street. At least she knew it was coming this time, and she landed in a roll.

By the time she had some sort of awareness of what was going on again, the hulking figure of Kagan was at her side, covered over with cloak and hood and hunched down so that he merely looked like one of the massive mongrel men that you sometimes glimpsed about town. He wasn’t dragging her along exactly, but he was close enough to catch her when she swayed and give her a little shove in the right direction.

Now that they were actually in motion, it was becoming harder to ignore the fact that she had absolutely no plan beyond this point. Normally this would be when she turned to Art and he’d already have composed a seventeen-step solution to whatever problem they were facing, but Art wasn’t here. He was still off somewhere, in the palace or back out with his army, surrounded by other people who were using that brain of his for their purposes when she needed him. It was rude.

So given no brighter ideas, she swayed a little closer to Kagan as they pushed their way through the crowded throngs on the streets and asked, “How are we going to catch up to them?”

“We’re going to walk.”

She nodded at that as if it made a single bit of sense. “We’re going to walk?”

“We’re going to walk, fast. Maybe even run a bit, when you’re feeling up to it. Try to keep up.”

They broke free of the market crowd and headed off along one of the less trodden thoroughfares, towards the city walls, but not towards the gates where they'd have found them shut against the besieging army.

Still, she couldn't let go of the idea that walking fast might not be sufficient. "They're on dragons."

"Not all of them. And a flight moves at the speed of whoever's slowest." Kagan put an arm around her shoulders and dragged her to the side of the road so a wagon didn't roll right over her. The rules for pedestrians in a city as busy as this mostly revolved around survival rather than right-of-way. "Otherwise, they'd have been down over the border and on your doorstep in a day. Kanatzi-dragons move slower than an ox. We can catch up before they clear the steppes."

She blinked up at him slowly. "Can of what?"

There was a momentary pause as he reached for the word in her tongue, then he remembered. "Thunder lizards. Big. Plodding. They use them as siege engines when they have to. Wouldn't have gone to war against you without them."

"Right. Okay. So, she'll be on one of them?"

"No. If they're keeping a necromancer alive, they'll have an aslinda-dragon watching over her. A true dragon. Ready to roast her if she pulls anything out her hat."

"She doesn't have a hat." She mumbled it, realizing how stupid her words were even as they came tumbling out her mouth.

He paused by the roadside to take the measure of her again. "Hit your head back there?"

"A few times, yes." She didn't feel any need to share the embarrassing details of her fall or her crawl through the sewers.

He sighed. "I'd carry you on my back if it wouldn't raise questions."

"I wouldn't let you." She staggered a step away, as if he were about to swoop down and scoop her up.

A grin cracked his face. "Can't string a sentence, but her pride still burns."

They came to the foot of the wall surrounding the little caldera they called home and immediately swerved to the side to walk parallel with it. Kagan kept his head down to stay out of sight of the guards atop the wall, not that the few saints so much as glanced their way.

"Did you perhaps forget that we were in a city under siege?"

He grunted. Then turned it back around on her. "How did you get in?"

“Sewers. You wouldn’t fit.”

He sniffed, then something seemed to dawn on him. He covered up whatever aromatic revelation he didn’t want to discuss with a gruff, “Pity.”

They ducked their heads together as though in deep conversation as they strolled by the guardhouse at the base of the walls. There was no sign of saints anywhere around it, but there was no point in tempting fate. Harmony outright asked him, “So, we’ve been wandering for a while now. What is your plan precisely?”

“You’re the one rescuing me, right?” He snorted.

She was finally willing to admit some degree of weakness, now that she was literally hanging off his arm to stay upright. “Does the rescuer often require the rescued to carry them because of traumatic head injuries?”

He didn’t even glance at her. “Most folk need head injuries to think snatching prisoners out of a city under siege is a good idea.”

She punched him in the arm, and he rocked away from her as if he’d suffered an actual blow instead of a tap. Then the pair of them froze. Each recognizing their own place in the tableau, but not the other player. She was treating him like he was Art. He was treating her like she was Orsina. Both of them had slipped into the well-worn grooves in the other’s relationship. She flushed with embarrassment, and were a cold-blooded creature capable of doing the same she was certain that he would have. Neither one of them could quite bring themselves to look at the other. Not with the memory of another person superimposed over the top.

Harmony cleared her throat. “You’re quite right, of course, I should have left you to rot.”

He bobbed his head in the periphery of her vision. “Wouldn’t be the first to say that.”

“Instead of your strained attempts at wit, do you think that you might focus on finding us a way out?” She didn’t shove him, didn’t hit him, didn’t do anything that might make them fall back into the same pattern of behavior. She didn’t think that she could bear the burden of walking in Orsina’s shoes. Particularly when it came to this man.

For his part, he remained cool and withdrawn. Something with which Harmony was all too familiar. Though this time it seemed to be for her benefit, rather than to punish her. This close, she could feel the vibrations of his voice in her teeth. “I’ve already got us a way out. Just need to wait until night.”

She glanced back towards the closed-up guard post and leaned in closer. “Oh, do you have some cunning skulduggery planned?”

He reached down to his belt and produced a coiled length of silken cord. It looked like it had originally been intended to tie back curtains, but somehow he’d laid hands on it. “I leave complicated to humans. I like simple. Got some rope. We run up there and climb down the other side before anybody sees us.”

She tried to gesture broadly at the wall and the many men standing atop it, but she overbalanced herself and stumbled back to her perch on his arm. “And how exactly do you suppose we’re going to achieve that?”

“We’ll run fast and climb down like squirrels.”

“And if they spot us and cut the rope?” Harmony asked, feeling slightly ill again.

“Then we’ll get down even faster.”