

Bloodbound
The Last King 2
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13 - The Other Side

Caldo, Regola Dei Cervia 112

Orsina ached, but it was a physical pain this time, instead of the spiritual burning that had been plaguing her since she was first roused. The day had been uncomfortable, to say the least. From her cage, she had been hauled up onto the dragon's back, arms bound behind her, and the sneering dragon-lord who'd laid down his commandments settled into the saddle behind.

In theory, he would catch her if she slipped. In practice, she could very easily imagine that he'd quite happily let her fall to her death and make up some story about her having tried to escape. He'd probably look people right in the eye and tell that lie, and not one of them would care enough about her to challenge him.

With each beat of the dragon's wings, through takeoff and beyond, she was rocked back into him. She didn't have the riding rhythm to predict the beast's movements, so each time it bucked up under her, she was lifted from the well-worn leather and deposited into the dragon-lord's lap.

The first time that happened, he almost threw her off entirely. Shoving her forward so she had to cling desperately with her thighs until the next undulation of the dragon flung her back upright. It was her legs where the worst of the pain was centered now. She didn't know if she'd be able to straighten them for a week after the cramping strain of clenching them, to keep herself in place.

And that wasn't even mentioning the friction burns. Dragon fire certainly won out in terms of sheer destructive power, but Orsina doubted that it won in terms of consistent pain. At least when a dragon sprayed fire on you it was a brief experience. The slow abrasion of riding on one's back lasted hours.

Worse than his attempts to fling her away from him were the times when she lost her hold and he made no complaint, letting her sit there on his lap while he leered down at her. Clearly enjoying himself.

Orsina could not have rightly told anyone how old she was at this point, but though her body was that of a young woman, she often felt that her mind had yet to catch up. She had no time to grow, no steps between child and adult in which to learn about herself and about others. Some took it as innocence; some took that innocence as an invitation.

Even though she ached and it would have been so much easier to just rest with her back to the broad expanse of dragon-lord behind her, she hauled herself forward time and time again. Ignoring his jeers, ripped away by the wind. She would sooner burn herself alive than tolerate that man's touch, and given that she had a dragon's shade dwelling within her, that was an option she could actively pursue if it came to it.

She might have expected pawing hands, if she were less innocent. Some attempt to hold her in place. Yet neither came, and it became increasingly clear that he did not actually want her, he just wanted her to feel ashamed about being so close to him. It was not about want; it was about power. About making her feel small.

They made landfall long before sundown. Long before she had expected, if truth be told. She had seen the speed at which dragons could fly, seen them zipping across the sky like birds despite their bulk. With focus, they likely could have been clear of these endless grassy steppes, but after she had slowly become numb to the deathly drop, Orsina realized that they were moving with anything but focus. Instead of traveling straight to their destination, they drifted from side to side constantly. Some part of it, she could tell from the draconic presence within, was to do with chasing rising pillars of warm air, allowing them to glide without effort. But chasing thermals did not explain their ponderous pace, particularly given that there would have been no shortage of thermals up ahead. It seemed almost as though they were searching for something, though she could see no sign of the man behind her looking down at all. Perhaps the dragon was hunting. Perhaps there was some arcane reason she couldn't decipher. Either way, they dithered their way across the sky until the sun began to dip, then swooped down to settle on some exposed stone.

It was onto that stone she had been unceremoniously dumped after being dragged from the saddle, and it was on that stone she now lay, trying not to groan and let the enemy know her weakness. At first she was all alone with the dragon-lord, and she had expected some fresh horror, but he seemed to have no interest in her at all. Down on his haunches, he studied the stone beneath their feet with more interest than he'd truly shown her all of the time they were in

flight, but not long after, a second of the true dragons and its rider arrived, carrying with it enough of the wooden cage that she was soon confined once more. Albeit in a far smaller container than the last time.

The men spoke in their guttural rumbling tongue, then the one who had borne her, and his dragon, left her in the care of the fresh dragon, flying off once more.

She had hoped that they might unbind her arms, which now ached almost as badly as her legs, but it seemed that luck was not on her side. So, she lay there for a while, hurting and angry, then she rolled over, so that different parts of her could hurt for a while. Just for variety.

The new dragon was smaller than the last, not quite so hoary and spiked by comparison. It was still a fearsome creature, of course. It was still a dragon. Yet when this one settled itself to stare at her intently, she nonetheless felt that there was less malice. It would burn her to a crisp the moment she gave any sign of calling her shades, but it wasn't looking forward to it, the way the other had. How anyone could read anything from the face of a great reptile was beyond her, but that was still the sense that she got.

After what must have been an hour of nothing but aches and stifled groans, she rolled over to face it, even though her hips started screaming with the effort. "Hey big guy, how are you doing?"

The dragon blinked. Sooty nictating membranes slipping back to the corners of its eyes from the corner when its lids parted. Weird the things she noticed when there was literally nothing else to pay attention to.

"You have a nice fly today? Enjoy all the big open spaces?"

This time it raised its head a little, cocked it to the side, barely a degree of inclination, but better conversation than she'd had the rest of the day. "Yeah, it must be nice to be able to completely stretch out."

"If you want bindings cut, only have to ask." The Arazi scared the hell out of her. She hadn't even realized he was there, dozing beneath the shade of his bondmate's wing.

Still, for all her surprise, Orsina managed to recover well. "Oh, but it is so comfortable having no blood in my hands."

"Come." He drew a bronze knife from his boot before he rose. It seemed he was a man of action, rather than words. Or he had so few words to use in her language that doing things came easier.

With some effort she made her way upright and staggered over to put her back to the man with a bared knife. Always a good idea. With one sharp tug, he sliced cleanly through the rough hemp that had bound her. It took a few good flexes before her hands went from numb to burning, but she accepted it gratefully.

“Thank you.”

He grunted in reply, then stalked back over to the dragon, who was already lifting a wing to accommodate him.

“Can I ask why we’re going so slow?”

There was clearly some internal debate before he rumbled back, “Scouting.”

“For what, exactly?” She almost wept at the prospect of somebody, anybody to speak to. It wasn’t the loneliness that was killing her, she’d spent most of her life alone in truth, it was the hostility. She wasn’t used to everyone openly hating her, only doing it behind her back, and it was beginning to wear on her patience.

Which was why it hurt just a little bit more when he replied, “Shut mouth.”

“I mean, I have eyes too.” A desperate edge was creeping into her voice. A reedy, wheedling sound that she detested. “I’m up in the air. I could help with the scouting.”

He shook his head, and there was a mirroring quaver in the dragon’s head. “No more speaking.”

She put her buzzing hands against her hips. “I’m offering to help, there’s no need to be rude.”

“Stop.” When the Arazi barked, the dragon mirrored his motions, its head jerking forward, its mouth falling open to the same degree. The only difference between them was that she could see fire roil behind its blackened teeth.

“I’m... fine.” She turned her back on the pair of them and slumped down to sit on the cool stone again. “Fine!”

As time rolled on, more dragons swept down from the sky. Both the true dragons the Arazi prized so dearly and other winged beasts that she probably would have called wyverns not so long ago. From a distance, they all shared similarities with the dragons, but whether through feathers, differences in the number of limbs, or simply an entirely different body shape, these lesser cousins of the dragon distinguished themselves.

Orsina watched them all intently, for want of anything better to do, and realized that there was a distinct pecking order, even among those lesser beasts. The closer they were to true

dragons, the more respect they were offered by the others. It was only in truly unfortunate moments in which there were creatures of similar stature and rank that things turned nasty, and they'd snap at one another to establish dominance. In turn, this seemed to set their riders to roaring arguments, sometimes summoning them from halfway across the gradually accumulating camp at a run so they could fling themselves bodily between their bondmates and indulge in the same sort of petty butting of heads in the lizards' places.

It was not so long later that the first of the wyverns on foot began to arrive. The terror-birds and the long-striders, carrying with them all the supplies required to put up the camp before night actually fell and the rest of the great caravan caught up. Orsina's friend was among them, though she caught scarcely a glimpse of him before he threw himself into the work of building up tents.

She could hardly expect him to come bounding up and start chatting about his day in full sight of all and sundry. She was a prisoner of war after all, one they attributed strange and mysterious powers to. It was probably in his best interests to set himself up in a tent at the far end of camp and never so much as look at her again. She'd be bored, and bereft of any friendly source of information, but it wasn't as though there was anything that she could give him in return beyond the pleasure of her dubious wit.

In what seemed the blink of an eye, the full town that had been disassembled in the morning seemed to have sprung up around her once more. All the same conversations were picking up, all the crowded throngs passing through. It even smelled like the same meals were being cooked from the wafting spices that reminded her how long it had been since she had a meal.

A bucket was provided, full of fresh water. A second bucket was provided shortly afterwards. Neither of the delivery-people seemed much inclined to talk. In fact, the moment she looked their way, they took off at full pelt, as if just talking to her would do them harm.

She drank, and she used the other bucket, then moved it across to the far end of the enclosure before coming back to find that her original jailer was now back in place, scowling at her. It was a testament to how busy the whole place had become that a full-grown dragon could come and go without her even noticing. At least its rider wasn't there. She wasn't sure she could have endured any more of his leering, and it would be a dreadful end, to be burned alive for throwing a bucket of piss on somebody.

Food did eventually present itself, accompanied by her erstwhile companion, who proffered it through the bars on little wooden skewers.

“Take it. Take it. Before anyone else sees me wasting food on a ghoul that eats the souls of the dead.”

She snorted. Then she took a tentative bite of the spiced meat. It was delicious. She didn't care if it was muskrat, goat, or any of the other myriad critters that could be found on the steppes. If it was human flesh, she probably would have only hesitated a moment before tearing into the next bite. Now that she could smell food, she was ravenous.

“Your people have some colorful stories about the Shadebound.”

“This is the first that you have eaten in a week.” He shrugged and passed her a torn off chunk of flatbread. “You might understand how that looks.”

She froze, mid-chew. “Wait, seven days?”

“This is the seventh.” He looked puzzled at her surprise.

She looked down at herself. She had certainly looked better. Garbed in borrowed men's clothes, bloodied and coated in both mud and soot in equal measures. Yet all of the new curves that her rapid aging before she was bonded had bestowed on her had not shriveled away. Not a single fresh wrinkle could be found, since she was bonded. For all the years, decades, and more she must have spent in the battle, beneath the grime her hands were still those of a young woman. A young woman who looked perfectly well fed. She felt fine. “I've gone without eating for seven days?!”

“You are eating now.” He was now munching away contentedly again. Talking around his food with the sort of manners that would have gotten Orsina a slap on the wrist from Harmony during her lessons. “So, six.”

“I would have starved!”

He paused mid-chew. “This is not your necromancy? You do not feed upon souls of the dead?”

“No.” She strangled the shout, muffling it into more of a low growl. It wouldn't be smart to draw attention, or to scare off her only point of contact.

He gave her a measured stare for a moment, then shrugged his shoulders before settling down with his back to the cage. “Strange.”

She slumped down beside him to finish her meal. Even if she wasn't really feeling the desperate need for it. “That's all you have to say?”

“You do not understand it. I do not understand it. What more should we say?”

They sat in companionable silence for a while. Companionable on his side, a little more introverted on Orsina's as she tried to decipher the meaning of this latest strangeness. Nobody had told her anything about not needing to eat anymore when she bound shades. What was more, she had most certainly eaten in her time at the House of Seven Shadows, indeed, almost all her social life, limited as it was, had revolved around sharing meals with the Volpe twins. This was new, it was definitely new. She had eaten and drunk and hungered for food up until her memory faltered.

Eventually, they were out of food and excuses for silence, so the Arazi spoke. "Did you enjoy your flight?"

She let out an involuntary laugh before she caught herself. "If I never rode a dragon again for the rest of my life, I would consider myself lucky."

"You didn't like the view?" He gestured vaguely around the desolation they had spent all day crossing. The empty land that belonged to nobody and was wanted by nobody.

"The view was delightful, the dragon itself was pleasant enough to ride once I found my rhythm." She couldn't deny that, even if she was aching now. "Though not easy to ride with bound hands. It was really just the company that truly spoiled things."

"You do not enjoy time with Emir the Scourge?"

She had to turn around to check if he was being sarcastic, but it seemed a genuine question. She was almost questioning if the Arazi even had sarcasm before she remembered just how much of it dripped constantly from Kagan's mouth. Though she supposed it was possible he'd picked that up later.

"How do you even ask something like that with a straight face? 'Oh, don't you like Marco the Murderer?' Honestly..." She turned her back to the Arazi once more.

"You should be comfortable with such men. Killers are your peers now." He spoke softly. So softly that she wasn't even certain it was him speaking, and not just her conscience griping at her. "How many dragons did you slay? How many men?"

She snapped back. "I haven't named myself for it."

The Arazi scoffed at her. "At least we are honest. We tell you what we are."

"Then he might need to be renamed to Emir the Molester."

For a moment, her only friend in the camp fell silent, then he asked, in a voice like his own but touched with the same resonant bass as the dragon-lords themselves, "He touched you?"

She shuddered at the memory of him at her back. “He made a great show of my powerlessness.”

“I will ask if another might carry you. A woman perhaps. This was not right.”

She’d seen the pecking order of the Arazi. She had seen the aslinda-dragon riders walking through camp like they were its kings and all the others peasants. The word of some wyvern scout was hardly going to be enough to dethrone one. “And they’ll all jump at your command, will they?”

“We are not animals. Whatever you think of us.” For the first time, she felt like her Arazi visitor was actually angry. There was little change to his tone or cadence, but there was a rumbling against the periphery of her senses. Like the little distant tugs she sometimes felt when Kagan had hunted with her and wanted to warn her of something unseen. “If I tell what he did, they will listen.”

It was said with such utter sincerity that Orsina had no choice but to accept it. “Well... thank you.”

He settled back down to sitting and let out a long sigh. Head lolling back so that he could look up into the ever-darkening sky. Night fell earlier up here on the steppes than down in Espher, and the farther north they went, the darker it would become. At least here, far from the city, Orsina could see the stars again. She had missed them.

Eventually he tried talking again. “The dragons like you.”

“Well, that’s a relief.” She snorted in an entirely unladylike manner. “Do they know I killed their kin?”

“Of course. But dragons respect strength. And you were strong in battle. None can deny that.”

“Does that mean that they won’t burn me for moving wrong?”

She felt the cage shift with his shrug without needing to look at him. “They will do their duty. As we all do.”

“Then I’m not sure how the dragons liking me makes a blind bit of difference.”

“They do not like...” He seemed to struggle for the right word. “People. Other dragons, yes. The Arazi they are bound to. But not strangers.”

She tried to remain pleasant in the face of adversity, but a bitter laugh came out all the same. “I suppose I’m just likeable.”

“Or you smell like dragon.”

She turned a little to see him. To realize that he was staring at her. “What is that meant to mean?”

“Arazi feel. We know what is inside. Dragons share that, once we are bonded.”

He looked like he was going to try to explain further, and probably despite the language barrier, he would have done a better job than anything Kagan had told her, or anything she'd read in the libraries of Covotana, but she wanted to get to the point and find out what he meant. “I'm aware of your empathy.”

He turned to meet her gaze. She noticed that though so much of him still looked human, his eyes bore a vertical slit in place of a pupil. “Why do you feel like a dragon inside?”

She knew the answer to that. But she hadn't known that any part of her shades were perceptible to other people. Even Shadebound themselves couldn't know what others had bound. They were concealed within the spirit of the one who bound them. In an instant, she was on edge, wondering how many more of her little secrets he was trying to pry his way into. An expert on the Arazi she may not have been, but certain things were obvious enough that an education was not required. They held Shadebound in contempt and dragons in reverence, if they discovered that she had inadvertently captured the escaping spirit of a dead dragon, a dragon that she herself had killed by her artifice, then there was no question that it would be held against her.

She stood abruptly, stomping away from him to fetch a drink from the water bucket. “What is this, an interrogation?”

Another cage-shifting shrug. “If you felt a shade in me, you would tell me. I feel a dragon, so I tell you.”

She scoffed at that. He wasn't nearly as slick as he thought he was. “Oh, so this is more of the good manners that make your mother so proud?”

“Yes.”

She swished the tepid water around her mouth and then spat. “Well, you're better mannered than a man who calls himself the Scourge, at least.”

He smiled then, despite her having seen through his ruse. “High praise.”

A rapid change of subject was in order. She did not want him circling back to matters of dragons inside her. She didn't even like to think about it herself, let alone indulge in conversation about it. To talk about it was to acknowledge it was real, and pretending that it wasn't seemed

the only way to keep the vicious draconic shade from attempting a takeover at any given moment. Perhaps now it would struggle, locked in conflict with all the others within her, but she was not willing to take the risk that it would not see this as an opportunity.

As Orsina, she could survive being caged. A dragon would not stand to be confined. It would level the whole camp, rather than face a moment under the woven bars. She could almost feel its anger as her own. She could almost feel the desire to lay waste, to burn and burn until nothing remained but her, undisputed ruler of all that she surveyed. It is what a dragon would have done, risen up and fought all comers instead of backing down and cowering to await their judgement. All she had to do was give in to the dragon within, to reach out for its strength, and all of this could be over. She could be free and powerful. She could rule.

Instead, she blurted out her last coherent thought. "Why are we traveling so slow? On the dragons we could be across the rest of the steppes in a day or two."

He gestured around him to the rest of the Arazi in camp. "We travel together. Always. It is not safe to be alone out in the open."

Still not quite ready to sit back down beside him, she stood, awkwardly, shifting her weight from leg to leg, trying to get the ache to fade. "I'm not certain that anyone would bother an army on the move, not with all your wyverns and the rest."

There was more than enough trouble here to scare off any of the fearsome beasts attributed to the steppes, and any roving bandits would have been looking for a markedly softer target.

He nodded to the great hoary beast where it lay glowering at her, as it always seemed to. "The aslinda protect us from what we cannot fight."

She scoffed at that. "If I had an army of terror-birds and thunder lizards at my command, I cannot imagine many things that I couldn't fight."

When she glanced back, his head was cocked to one side, and then dawning realization crossed over his features. His mouth fell open. "You really do not know?"

Her brow furrowed as she tried to decipher what he could possibly have been talking about now. "Know what?"

He shook his head in disbelief. "Espher is another world."

"What is that meant to mean?" Orsina was getting increasingly frustrated. "Stop speaking in riddles."

He held up his hands. As though he were balancing things upon them. “There is the world where the rest of us live, and there is yours. And you don’t know there is a difference.”

She opened her mouth to refute that but was cut off by screaming. Her Arazi companion was on his feet and reaching for a weapon before she could even spot the source. With spear in hand, he pounced onto the saddle of his wyvern and stood in the stirrups.

It was dim by then, evening was falling, yet a spectral light played across the camp, flickering and bursting. Familiar, yet alien. Like moonlight through tree branches, though the night sky was shrouded in clouds and the nearest trees were in Espher.

The screaming fell silent. It had Orsina rocking on her feet to find it so abruptly gone. Then she felt the pressure on her skin, on her mind. The grave chill that radiated from the spirits of the dead. Shades.

Was this a rescue? She had no idea. She ran to the edge of her cage and scrambled up the bars as high as she could manage before banging her head against the curvature of the bent canes. “What is happening? I can’t see. What is it?!”

Screaming started up all over again. Spotty to begin with, but unified in one overwhelming wave of horror not a moment later. The crowd that had been milling about so freely like any city street had found fresh purpose now; they parted and flowed around her cage like a river about a rock. They flocked and fled, but not far. She would have thought they’d have gone on running, but the moment they were past her, they seemed to grind to a halt, with a solid half of them looking like they wanted to run back the way they’d come and fight. Even if they’d have no hope.

The stuttering light strobed higher, illuminating more. Showing more of the grotesque shape rising up from beneath the old stones they’d laid their camp on. Spindly arachnid legs of blinding white reaching up and out, each tipped with chaotic, jagged spurs. Raking through the crowds. Reaping life everywhere they touched.

A woman slammed against the bars of the cage, sending Orsina tumbling back down. “You! You have called them down upon us.”

They all flinched as a concussion rocked the whole camp. Tents and wyverns alike were launched from where they had stood so solidly, raining down into the fleeing crowds. The spindles lashed out at them in flight, piercing through a terror-bird and ripping the life from its body as it fell, body undamaged, soul rent.

“It isn’t me!” Orsina had to shout to be heard over the renewed screaming of the crowd. “I’m not doing anything!”

She heard the shade then, its cries somewhere between whale-song and the shattering of glass. It felt like glass jammed into her ears. The cold smoothness of it. She dropped to her knees with the impact of that sound, even though the explosions in the air had washed over her without harm.

Another of the Arazi leveled a spear at her through a gap in the bars. “Call them off! Call them off now!”

From behind the flailing legs or arms of the first shade, a second shape began to rise, smaller than first, but nonetheless fearsome. While the first had looked solid enough for a thing made of moonlight, the second was tattered and insubstantial, as though even its spectral form had begun to decay. There was the suggestion of a horse’s skull beneath the shroud it wore, huge, humped shapes that might once have been wings at the back and sides. While the great spider moved with wild abandon, this shade seemed less hurried, more focused. It had waited this long for a meal, what was a little longer?

Eyes watering at the sight of them, Orsina held up her hands to the baying crowd as though them being empty rendered her harmless. “I’m not doing this. Please. You have to believe me.”

Another voice bellowed out. Deep and guttural. “Liar!”

Emir was stripped of his armor, his scaled hide shining wet in the ghost-light. He’d been bathing when the shade struck. Clothes he didn’t bother with, but his great spear was in hand. Hefted and ready to fling at her.

A third shade and a fourth rose up from beneath the feet of the fleeing mass. Smaller than even the humans they must once have been. Each of them the reflection of the other, twins painted in reverse. One-horned heads sat atop bodies bristling with spines. The same shroud that hid the ghastly form of the horse-headed ghouls flowed out in a train to cover them over too, only their barbs protruding through it as they darted about, snapping elongated jaws.

There was a frantic edge to Orsina’s voice as she looked around her for proof, anything that she could use to show she wasn’t behind the shades laying waste to the camp. “Look, count my shadows. Count them. One shadow. One! I’m not channeling. I’m not doing anything.”

Emir dropped his spear, seized the bars of her cage and heaved. It was only held down by its own weight, and the strength of man and dragon combined in one was more than enough to

overpower it. In an instant she was free, standing face-to-face with the dragon-lord. He barked, “Stop them!”

One great arching leg of the spider came sweeping over all their heads, knocking a rider from a thunder lizard and sending both into a pitiful, if gigantic, heap. She could not see the other shades. She wished she could not see that one. What was anyone meant to do in the face of a thing like that?

“I can’t.”

Her only friend in the camp had soot marks streaking his face when he and his wyvern came bounding back. Campfires had spread to the dried hides that were flung down on them in the chaos. All the camp was alight. He did not command her. He begged.

“Use your curse; bind the shades.”

Her stomach turned at the thought of inviting those things inside her. Suckling them on her life, trying to bend them to her will. There was no mind within these ancient specters. No point of connection she could use to bargain with them. What could she offer that shades so powerful could not tear from others freely?

“I can’t! That isn’t how it works.”

Another Arazi and her true dragon had waded in through the crowd while Orsina had eyes only for the shades. It was this one that barked, “Make it work!”

Surrounded by the Arazi, with two great dragons now looming over her, Orsina reached for the power inside herself on which she had slammed the door.

With her own shades unleashed, she could corral these wild ones back, beat them down, overpower them not only with her will, but with the boundless life that flowed through her from Kagan. It would not matter that her shades were young and weak compared with the monsters she faced, because they had her to drink from, and the unbound ghosts of these rocks had only what remnants they still held on to.

She reached for the door between her waking mind and the hollow in her soul, and she could not make it budge. All of this time she had been terrified of letting the shades out, of risking the same ravaging that she had suffered after the battle when she lost all control over them, but now they would not come when she called.

Her eyes snapped open to fresh horrors. There were still so many of the Arazi between her and the shades, and they were changing course now, drifting sideways through the camp, reaving souls as they went. “I can’t. I can’t stop them. I can’t...”

“Do it now, or they die. All of them die.” Her only friend in camp had leapt down again from his steed. He took her face in his hands, meeting her watering eyes with his serpentine stare. “We are not your enemy. We only have one enemy. Prove you are not it. Save them.”

She crushed her eyes shut again against the pleading in his eyes. She opened herself up to the shades, let life spill out of her in every way it wanted. Yet still they did not come. Neither her shades nor the monstrous mindless things out there. Tears ran down her face as she strained, her hands shook as the life that kept her body in motion was forced out into the air, again and again, to no avail. She could not call her shades. She could not call these new ones. She could do nothing but watch.

“I can’t!”

Emir gave a sharp nod, believing her at last, then he turned to face the shades at his dragon’s side, both of them bounding against the flow of the crowd. Trying to get in as close as they could to the shades. He must have been mad. It didn’t matter how big a lizard he rode or how strong he was, a shade would not be stopped by either. Strength of arms could not touch the dead. Scale and claw could not touch the dead.

The horse-headed specter sprang forward from amidst the scattering dregs of the Arazi camp, blazing light trailing from those unfortunates it passed through to restore it to all of its luminous glory. It shone so bright after this feast that Orsina could scarcely look away. It shone so bright that even the dragon fire seemed dim by comparison.

When Emir’s dragon flamed, the shade burned.

It was not the searing chemical death of venom ignited that Orsina had felt the touch of. The venom itself passed harmlessly through the shade’s body to spatter across the ground and catch alight when the spark chased along the spray after it. Instead it was the blinding ignition of a candle in utter darkness. The moon-blue glow of the shade burned brighter, brighter, so bright it rivaled the sun in the sky, then it was done. The golden glow of its outline hung for but a moment before only the afterimage of the light was left in its place, then nothing at all.

The dragon’s fire had consumed it from the inside out. Orsina blinked the burning from her eyes. She was wrong. It had consumed the dragon’s fire and found it too much. When vision

returned, she saw the carnage left in the dragon's wake. Everywhere the shade had been extended had blackened with soot. Every tent was ablaze, every person consumed. The Arazi had always been able to destroy the shades, but they had wanted for a way to do it that cost no lives. She could not give that to them.

Whatever had happened to her in the sky above the battlefield had made sure of that. There would be no savior from Espher coming to fend off the shades. No Shadebound to be shackled and carried along with the dragon-wagon-trail. To be used as a shield for the poor, innocent war-parties setting out to enslave and kill the people of Espher. Whatever they wanted from her, she did not give it, no matter how desperately she might have wanted to.

Another of the aslinda-dragons swooped low from the sky above, strafing by the upper reaches of the spider-legs as they strained for it and unleashing a fresh tempest of flame down upon it.

It took the three dragons working in tandem, pouring fire and life into the great spider beast, to lay it low. Even from where she stood behind them, the heat of the flame was enough to crisp Orsina's hair and make her flinch back farther, backpedaling into Emir, who threw her down to the ground in disgust.

Between shades and dragons there had been a dozen or more stragglers, and now they were gone. Blackened husks curled up on the ground. Sooty smears across the stone. Any that were too close to the shades were dead. Where the hulking spirits had hung in the air was a faint mist that evaporated faster than the rich smoke around it. The shades' destruction had left a void that nothing seemed in a rush to fill.

As she scrambled back to her feet, Orsina cast her panicked gaze around. The cost in Arazi lives must have been catastrophic, yet none of the ones nearby seemed all that shocked. With the worst of the shades driven off, grief began to creep through the camp in drips and drops, but Orsina was stunned at just how little such widespread death seemed to faze these people. It was as if huge rampaging shades rearing through the camp was a perfectly regular occurrence.

Perhaps it was.

For all the terror, there had been nobody tripping over one another, nobody rushing back to grab at their belongings, scant as they may be. It was that moment, when the quiet fell and all was silent but for the sobbing and soft crackle where the venom still burned that convinced Orsina that they had become accustomed to this horror.

An enemy only the true dragons could fight.

It had not even crossed her mind that there would be shades beyond Espher's borders. It had not occurred to her that what was an inconvenience or folktale to one nation's people could be the nightmare of another. Before, she had not grasped the stories of the Arazi, had not understood what the coming of the dragons had meant to them. She had known that they were always nomads, but now she understood what they were running from.

How could you build a city if there was no way to pluck up the shades that would grow in it like weeds? How could you live at all, knowing that in death you might come back to plague all those you knew and loved? If this was a normal day for them, small wonder that the greatest evil they could imagine was a shade that could not be stopped.

When she looked around at the disgust on all the Arazi's faces, the hatred of her, she understood it now. When they retrieved her cage, she made no objection to being put back inside it.

14 - A Shade Named Covotana
Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

“I truly do not understand the purpose of this excursion. What is it you seek in the city that we do not have in the palace?”

The city rolled by the carriage windows, and Artemio found that he could not drag his gaze away from it to study the ambassador’s expression. The black flag of Agrant hung from the city walls. The usually bustling streets were subdued. Strolling saints tamping down any hint of rebellion or joy. Artemio counted one every seven streets; it was simple enough to calculate their numbers from there. Adding in those he’d seen in the palace, and on the walls, he now knew the full numbers of the Agrantine forces in the city.

They didn’t have enough to hold the line. Even accepting that their swordsmen were the finest in the world, a sword did not stop an arrow, nor did their impressive black robes. The robes let them move freely through the forms of the sword and made them look very striking but did nothing to help when they were struck. Rushing the walls would be costly, of course, but Artemio was inside the walls already, and if between him and the cult at his disposal they could not see a way to get those gates open, then he would be thoroughly ashamed of himself.

He did spare her a glance, to let her know she was receiving a reply. “Perspective, primarily. While I have no doubt that you are telling me all that you need me to know, I believe that consulting with someone else versed in the politics of court might give me a better grasp of precisely what I am signing up for.”

She was staring out of the window too, but she wasn’t really seeing anything. She was bored. Parted from the comforts of the palace for what she considered to be no good reason. There was a hedonist streak to her that had seemed entirely normal in the company of the average Espheran but now that she was being compared with her own countrymen was marked. She was bored.

“And there is some reason that we could not simply have summoned this consultant to the palace?”

“Several good reasons, in fact. The Prima of the House of Seven Shadows is not strictly a subject, or rather, she holds a position of such high esteem within Covotana that it would be considered a rebuke to demand her attendance in such a manner, rather than making the visit to her.” This was not a lie; none of it was a lie, exactly. So long as he continued telling at least a

greater part of the truth to the ambassador, he would be protected from missteps born of forgetting. If he was caught out, then her politeness would rapidly decline. “If I mean to rule, I shall need her support, so beginning our relationship in such a manner would be a gross misstep.”

“That is a single reason. Did you have others?” He could hear the raised brow without even having to look her way.

“The second reason was so that I could look over the city and see how well my people are coping with the occupation. It is my understanding that seeing their leaders traveling among them is a source of comfort to the common man, allowing them a sense that somebody is in charge and events are not unfolding entirely at random. It is why public appearances are considered a vital part of the royal duties. No matter what others might say of pomp and ceremony.” If any of the common people out on the street needed their hearts lifted, then it would not be done by his appearance, nor that of the black-clad coach rolling along the main streets of Covotana as if they were already a part of the Agrantine Empire. Nobody would see him, but he would see everything from his vantage point behind these lace curtains. None would dare to so much as look askance at anything bearing Agrantine colors, not with saints everywhere.

He nearly jumped off the bench when he felt a hand close on his leg. His own hand involuntarily grabbing for it before he realized that the squeeze of his thigh was meant to convey affection, rather than a prelude to some sort of grapple. He could almost manage a bashful smile and to cover the ambassador’s hand with his own for a moment before she withdrew it with all grace.

“I must say, Duke Volpe, that it is sounding increasingly like your mind has been made up with regards to the future rulership of Espher, and now you are simply running on the spot. Would that be an unfair assessment?”

The ambassador had been described in many ways—as a beauty, as an unmatched swordswoman, as a skilled politician—but in that moment the most apt description Artemio could settle upon was that she was most like a butcher’s dog with a stolen bone. Gnawing away at it without rest or respite until she cracked through to the marrow.

“It would certainly be a premature one.” He smiled at her politely and wondered what the correct protocol was for women squeezing at your legs. It was not an area that he had any

personal experience with prior to this moment. She was a married woman, so he felt quite certain that he was not dealing with an overture, yet he could think of no other scenario in which such an act would have been even vaguely appropriate. “I am not one for snap decisions, Ambassador. As I’m sure you are aware. Until I have all of the information that is available, I will not be making a decision.”

Her eyes narrowed as she was thwarted, but she came back with a counterthrust of her own. “And you suppose that your Prima will be able to provide you with some knowledge of the departed king?”

“Most likely not.” He would have expected the Prima to be dead in the streets if she did have any knowledge that the ambassador wanted concealed. She may have been the greatest Shadebound in all of the land, but just as swords would not help against arrows, neither would an array of shades do much in the face of star-steel blades. “But the lay of the land will also be a vital consideration. As to my final reason, I have been cooped up in the palace for days without end and now feel desperately in need of some fresh air.”

“The rooftop gardens are not to your liking?” The ambassador’s brow was up again. He could feel it. Arching.

Artemio let out a huff of laughter. “I prefer fresh air of a baser kind, the sort that does not have clouds drifting through it level with you.”

“To think that so lofty a personage would have a fear of heights.” He did glance her way that time, to show his contempt for her wordplay. She smiled all the wider for being treated to such a glance. “Is this an admission of fear from one who denies it so stalwartly?”

Artemio smiled tersely. “The heights do not trouble me so much as the birds crashing into me as I try to enjoy my wine.”

“Shall I have my men erect nets for your protection from aggressive avians?” The ambassador was smirking, and Art couldn’t even be annoyed about it, not when he was the one cracking jokes. Amusing her. Making a friend of what should have been his worst enemy.

They were far from the palace now, making good time as they headed towards the outer walls of the city, traveling uphill all the way at a slight incline, through the densely packed inner city and out into the walled estates. It was easy to make good time when the streets cleared themselves for you.

The streets were always quieter out here, where lingering for too long too close to a noble household was liable to result in a thorough beating by the guards, but now they were desolate, and even the itinerant merchants and journeymen hoping to make a name for themselves with commissioned work were not doing their rounds.

“I think not. Her Majesty would likely object to my obstructing her view.”

“She does truly seem to love it up there.” Modesta sighed. “I do not believe she ever took a meeting with me anywhere else in all my tenure as ambassador. Perhaps she appreciates the sense of connection to her kingdom?”

Artemio had never felt farther from Espher than when he was perched up there, vision extending as far as the distant horizon in every direction. A kingdom was its people, not its land, and up there staring down on them all, they looked like a particularly industrious antheap that had been overturned. If he were king, he would avoid places like that like the plague. Anything that made him forget that his place was down on the ground with the real people he ruled. To do otherwise was folly.

“I suspect she prefers the solitude. And the lack of places for spies to be hiding and listening in on her conversations.”

When he dragged his gaze from the window at last, Modesta was staring at him with an odd expression on her face. Shrewd. “Have you considered making some other improvements to the rooftop gardens?”

He sighed. “To add some helpful little culverts in which listeners might be stowed?”

“As a gift to your lady wife, Duke Volpe.” That shut him up. “It is my understanding that the former king did not make a single improvement upon the place. And as you know, a happy house is a productive house.”

There was an uncomfortable warmth in her voice as she trailed off. As though the prospect of his... productivity was personally pleasing to her. “You do wish to please your wife?”

It left Art feeling off balance. “I... yes, of course. I will not be some ogre, treating her poorly. If I should choose to accept your offer, and she my proposal.”

“Speaking as a happily married woman, I must inform you that there are many degrees between ogreish behavior and matrimonial bliss. It seems reasonable to expect that you will put the same dedication into your marriage as every other aspect of your life, so I should not worry that you will trend towards the former. Indeed, from what I have heard of her last husband’s

treatment of her, you would be hard-pressed not to be a marked improvement.” Seeing the struggle of emotions vying for control of Artemio’s face, she added, “Do you deny it?”

He set his jaw. “I will not speak ill of my king.”

“Then allow one who is not bound by convention to do so for you. The king was not worthy of the throne of Espher, and his father was little better. The rulership should never have passed from Volpe hands. On that we can agree at least?”

She was treading into dangerous territory indeed. The kind of subject never openly addressed. With good reason.

“Perhaps if that was Agrant’s view on the matter then they should not have provided material support to the usurpers.”

“Perhaps if I had a say in policy at the time, they would not have. By now I am sure that you realize the Agrantine court is not a monolith, any more than your own.” She reached out to him again, but this time stopped short when the glower on his face made it apparent that the contact was not wanted, nor would it be reciprocated. “What others have done, I cannot undo, history is not mine to rewrite. But is it not our place to put right the mistakes of the past?”

He let out a long breath, trying to steady himself from saying something he might regret. “It is a relief to hear you finally admit Agrantine involvement in the coup.”

“There are no more Cerva to protect.” She shrugged only a single shoulder. “What care have I if their ruined reputation is tarnished further?”

He dragged in another breath, with all the words he wanted to scream trapped inside it. “Honesty is the true breath of fresh air, I must say.”

“Then it is my hope that you will breathe easier in the future. For I never mean to deceive you again.”

Silence rang in the carriage between them as he waited for the question, but none was forthcoming. Either she had gone native, was becoming ruder with his company, or she did not want to know the answer to the obvious question posed by her statement. Did he believe her?

He did not. He had taken her measure the first time they met. She would say whatever it took to get what she wanted, and while she found it easier, more comfortable, to weave truths, the sad fact was that she would go on saying whatever was necessary to further the ends of Agrant. For all her fine words, she was a zealot like all the rest of her people.

Artemio knew how she thought because he thought in the same way. He knew how to lie with truths, and he would do so, so long as it protected Espher. Exactly the same as she did.

“Then I swear to you, Ambassador, that I shall treat you in kind.”

The gardens that surrounded the House of Seven Shadows were still in a state of disrepair after the dragons’ attack. Soot scars across the gravel. Plants withered to black nothing. He could not recall if he had seen this place since that day, amidst all the chaos of planning a war. He supposed that he must have, but his mind had been turned inwards. It almost felt right for it to look this way. To show some hint at the mighty terrors that dwelled within. He hoped that it filled the ambassador with the same dread.

There were no Shadebound or students in the grounds, as there usually were. Nor were there any signs of the servants who attended to the place. Noble scions would have been recalled to the safety of their homes, and the servants were most likely secreted away inside where they could not be interfered with. There were no saints here, which struck him as odd. If he had known of such a well of power that might be brought to bear against his invading army, he would have occupied it with all force. It showed how little the ambassador understood of what the Shadebound were capable of, even now.

The Prima herself stood waiting by the doors. A high honor that likely would not have been extended to Artemio or the ambassador not so long ago. They went through some of the usual pleasantries, thanking her for her time, asking after mutual acquaintances, all while still standing outside in the sunlight. With no servants at hand, the ambassador had to tie a blindfold around her own head, a length of silk that she produced from where it had been threaded around her belt.

Artemio had never seen anyone walk into Septombra with the confidence of the ambassador. She moved like the servants did, with a familiarity that bordered upon contempt. Out of ingrained habit, he had offered his arm to her, and she did take it, but it was apparent after only a short stroll through the labyrinthine corridors that he was an accessory rather than a necessity. They reached the safety of the Prima’s study in record time.

As the ambassador unwound the scarf, the Prima dipped into an arthritic curtsy before them. “It is an honor to receive such esteemed guests. How may I be of assistance to you?”

It was almost bizarrely formal for a woman who scant months before had been flinging Art off his seat for showing up late to a lecture. A woman who had raised him to the fullness of adulthood, as much as any woman had.

With the same rigid formality, trying not to give away too much of their personal relationship to the ambassador, he began, "I am sure that you are aware of the situation in the palace, the absence of the king."

"Some small part of that tale has come to me, yes." There was a sarcastic edge to her reply that he hoped passed Modesta by.

It seemed that it had, given the ambassador's willingness to fling herself into the conversation despite its acidity. "I have of course done all that I can to keep the Prima abreast of the situation. Have I not?"

"Of course, Modesta." The Prima reached over to pat the woman on the back of her hand. "You have been as good a friend to me as always."

Artemio repressed a shudder at that particular piece of familiarity. Of course they were friends. Both were women, outsiders in court, with massive power behind them that the rest of the Teatro had no real grasp of. "Then am I to assume that the ambassador has also informed you of her solution to the issue of the empty throne?"

"I must say, it came as something of a surprise, but I cannot fault her reasoning. Who would have thought all those months ago when I set you on your course to give aid to the House of Cerva that your star would rise so swiftly. My dear boy..." She trailed off, realizing even as she said it that it was hardly the correct form of address for a duke, let alone a king. "I suppose that I must get out of the habit of speaking to you thus. When you take the throne, all of the past is forgotten, and you must start anew. Did you know that in the early days of Espher, before the true lineage was brought out, each new king of Espher would take a new name upon their coronation, to mark the differentiation?"

She was usually terse, her answers usually providing only the bare minimum of information required to set others on their own courses of study. The fact that she was waxing lyrical about so pointless a thing suggested that she understood that his visit to the House of Seven Shadows was not for his stated purpose of an interview with her and was in fact for something else entirely. Something that would be ably aided and abetted by someone who was willing to fill the silence that any lapse in his side of the conversation might have caused. May the ancestors bless her, she understood why he was there, and she was letting him know that she was willing to help.

“That is a detail that must have passed me by in my studies. Though I must say that written histories from that period always made a great deal of addressing them exclusively by their coronated names.”

She smiled then, softly, her offer of inane conversation accepted. “Contemporary sources would most likely have sought to curry favor with their ruler by only offering the utmost respect. Perhaps it is that same impulse that I find myself following even now.”

He settled back on his seat. “Well, I am no king. Not yet at least. So, you may continue to be as familiar with me as you desire, Prima. And we might cross whatever bridges come as we reach them.”

She settled in herself, already aware of the way that he had loosened his bonds upon his shades, the way that he was leaking tiny fragments of life out into the air. To any Shadebound, his actions would have been entirely obvious, but of course, Modesta was not Shadebound. She could not know that he was extending his consciousness out to envelop the room, and then pushing it farther still. Pushing against the spiritual pressure of the Great Shades that lay dormant about the House of Seven Shadows. Weaving through them to find the one he sought.

“Then, my dear, dear boy, you must tell me how this old woman can be of help to you.”

His smile remained polite and fixed as he continued to split his attention. “I have received the ambassador’s invitation to restore the Volpe line to the throne, and while I have no doubt that all she has broached the subject with have been entirely in favor of the idea, it struck me that it is often in the best interests of an occupied people to declare the ideas of their conqueror’s ruler to be the best that they have ever heard. I believe that you may have a more balanced perspective on the matter.”

She brought a hand up to her chin, and one finger began to tap on her lower lip. She had been a handsome woman in her time, and even now, so late in life, after having spent so much of that life on the shadework for which she was famed, he could see the shape of that young beauty behind the mask of age.

Weaving down past all of the usual lesser shades, giving each of the great ones a wide berth so he could maintain his focus without being distracted or blinded by the way they shone, he delved down into the volcanic stone beneath them.

When the Prima spoke, it felt like it was coming to him from a great distance, as though his ears were currently in a different room from his body and the sounds were being funneled down to him with a slight delay.

“You’ll be seen as an egotistical ambition-riddled opportunist obsessed with power, you’ll be considered a tool of the Agrantine, and you’ll face massive opposition across the spectrum. The Teatro will tear you apart if you even attempt to make a moral argument at any point during your rule, and many of the houses that backed the Cerva will openly rebel.”

When he didn’t immediately leap to his own defense in the face of such implications, the ambassador took it upon herself to carry things on alone. “We believe that there may be a way to shift the support of those who backed the Cerva by marrying our young king to the current queen. Do you suppose that would be sufficient to keep rebellion less... open?”

Once more he could distantly sense what his eyes were telling him, the way the Prima shifted uncomfortably in her seat as his spirit and life flowed over her, the way she made it seem as though she were merely considering the options before replying, “That could certainly work. It would also ease the concerns of those in the pro-Agrantine camp considerably.”

Despite his distraction, Artemio couldn’t help but comment upon that. “I rarely present moral arguments. I have never found that they gain much traction with the nobles of Espher. As though I were speaking in a foreign tongue.”

The Prima nodded primly. “Which addresses another issue.”

Artemio’s split mind began to ache. Longing to be focused in one place or another. Yet he could not surrender either part of his consciousness nor entirely decouple them. The former because it would mean abandoning either the ruse or his true purpose in visiting. The latter because it was impossible without permanent damage. Even attempting his current explorations was stretching him thin to breaking point.

“As for my appearance, I do not care for opinions. It matters little to me how I am seen, so long as I am obeyed.”

The Prima had always been a stern woman in his company. But now amusement set her face aglow. “In all honesty, being an egotistical ambition-riddled opportunist obsessed with power may very well endear you to many of the lords and ladies of the greater houses, given that it is a fair description of them.”

It felt as though his words were coming slow and sluggish, but that was because his split awareness was slowing his perception, not because his mask of concerned interest had slipped. “So, you believe that there is a possibility that I might take the throne without destroying Espher entirely?”

She met his eye, recognized precisely what he was doing, and took responsibility for his preservation without a moment’s thought, launching herself into a rambling speech that might, if he were lucky, last long enough for him to complete his task. “There are a great many factors to consider, my dear boy. Those opposed to Agrantine influence will likely see your marriage as a testament to your subservience. One problem solved and another created. Likewise...”

This time, he had no need to hold back, no need to divide himself over so great of a stretch. He let his awareness slip out from his body, trusting in the Prima to keep it safe until his return and in the ambassador to be so confident in her measure of him that she wouldn’t trouble to cast him a second glance when there was so much that a potential enemy or ally was saying. So many words to be picked over for double meanings. How could she know that they were little more than chaff being tossed up to obscure her view of the real task at hand.

Without the bifurcation, everything became infinitely easier. He could sense all of the Great Shades of Septombra in their allotted places: Gufo lingering in the tower above the library, waiting to trade in knowledge and secrets; the Hollow Armor, just waiting for some enterprising Shadebound to bend it to their will. He sank down past them both, past every worked stone of the House and all of the natural tunnels beneath them to boot. What he was reaching for was older than all of this, more powerful and ancient than the city herself.

Deep down in the dark he felt it, not a mind, not even the specter of a mind, but a rumbling giant asleep. Emotions in turmoil, rage. Blinding rage. Pressing in on his own mind. Trying to make it his anger. Through his forge spirit he could make the connection, but it was his own fury that truly let his consciousness meet it. Fire spoke to fire, wrath spoke to wrath, and while its fury was old and simmering, his had been building more and more with every passing moment since the city had come into sight. After all he had done, after all he had sacrificed, to see the flags of the very people that had driven his family into near exile hanging on the capital had almost driven him mad.

He let The Fire Below feel that wrath. Let it recognize it, and instead of letting its anger become his, he made his anger into its.

With the seed planted, he withdrew with all haste. He could not allow his mind to be drawn down into that endless burning. Yet in his fear of being devoured whole he leapt back too far, returning to his body.

“...to be entirely honest with you, if it had not been for your victory against the Arazi, it is likely that we could not even consider this course of action to be advisable. Even with it, there will likely only be a short window of opportunity in which you will be considered acceptable, primarily on the basis of the support of the common man. I believe that there are songs being sung about you in taverns, if you could believe it. That sort of goodwill could certainly be parlayed into...”

The Prima was still going, still perfectly absorbing the full attention of the ambassador. He turned to glance at Modesta, and from her periphery she must have seen him and nodded back. For a moment he was pinned in place by her gaze, unable to slink back out of his body to resume his task, but painfully aware that with every tick of the Prima’s grandfather clock, he came closer to losing his tenuous grasp on the Great Shade.

At last, she turned her eyes away from him, and he could flee. Back down, through his own mind and farther down, sending his hollow spirit all the way back to the roiling mass of magma that still persisted beneath the caldera of Covotana even after all of these millennia of dormancy.

It moved.

For all of written history, since the founding of the city, the molten stone below had been still, lulled into slumber by the efforts of the Shadebound, generation after generation of them passing through Septombra had done their duty, learning their limits against the implacable weight of an ancient shade with all the care for humanity as the shifting of tectonic plates. The Fire Below had always been an object lesson to them, to recognize that there were limits to what even the most powerful of Shadebound could wield, but also that they could still exercise influence over those Great Shades beyond their power to master.

Now he meant to undo it all. Instead of soothing the Fire, he fanned the flames. He let more and more of its rage build, unabated. He made no effort to calm it, to protect the city that he knew and loved so dearly. If the Agrantine held Covotana, then it was no longer the heart of Espher, it was a cancer in her chest, and if the only way to be cured was to burn out the infection, then that was precisely what he meant to do. He stoked the fire, built it up, waited until the surface was sizzling against the lower reaches of the stone plug above. The stone plug on which

the whole city had been built, and then he left it there, simmering, ready to erupt with just the slightest nudge.

He was connected to The Fire Below now. By his shade, by his anger. There would be no effort or searching when the time came. Only a moment. One moment, when he decided that this was the better option, and he let his mind and the primordial fury touch.

“...needless to say, swift action will be required to secure your position if you should proceed. Eliminating the most vociferous of your opponents, purging remnants of the Cerva line. I am not certain that you will have the stomach for the actions that must be undertaken to hold a throne, not only for yourself, but for future generations. And as far as your descendants go, they shall have to prove themselves time and again or face the risk of deposition. After all, it is a difficult thing to kill a king for the first time, but once the seal on the bottle is broken, there is no preventing another pour being made.”

The tail end of the Prima’s speech covered over the sound of his indrawn, shuddering breath. His hands shook where they grasped the arms of the chair, white-knuckled. His mind spun as he tried to get back up to speed with this struggle, instead of the one he had been engaged in beneath them all.

He wet his lips. “This plan of the ambassador’s should be a complete success so long as I am a brutal tyrant and all my hypothetical children and grandchildren prove to be exceptional rulers without flaw. This does not seem to be the cut-and-dried situation that was initially presented to me.”

Modesta had the good grace to look a little embarrassed. “I had assumed that you would continue to excel to a degree that would render such objections obsolete. Did you intend otherwise?”

Artemio was not some child to be pulled along by his ego. “The study of the history of royal lineage may not have been one of my foremost interests, but there can be no denying that each subsequent generation is something of a roll of the dice. Just as my children may not have red hair, so too might they be lacking in the requisite intellect to run rings around their enemies. Stability reliant upon exceptions is no stability at all.”

She threw up her hands in an imitation of irritation. “My dear Duke Volpe, you must understand that over the periods of time we are discussing, massive change can occur...”

Whatever she meant to say next, Artemio entirely missed. He had threaded his life and will down into The Fire Below, intent on lighting it like a fuse when the time came. It had not occurred to him that the shade might yank on it exploratively when it was discovered. Flame leapt up the length of the cord. The massive weight of the spirit hauled him down. Tearing him from his awareness of what was happening in the room where his body still sat, propped up with the same vacant expression.

In an instant, he went from calm to panicked, struggling against the awful gravity of the thing below. It was fire, it consumed. He had left a thread of himself there for it to latch onto, for it to suckle upon and draw him down. The old fire burned brighter from the fuel he'd fed it. The rumbling deep beneath the city built from so low that nobody could hear it, to startling the birds that roosted on the terra-cotta tiles of the city through the winter into flight.

He hauled back with all of his strength, drawing the fire back up along the same cord of will, drawing it into himself. Filling his mind with its ancient rage. There was no will behind it, no malice, only that blind desire to destroy and destroy until nothing remained. He swallowed it down and made it part of himself and then crushed the cord so tight that not another drop of magma could force its way up, no matter the pressure. The burning thread between shade and man remained.

Then he was back to himself, back to the room, quaking with unbridled terror at what had almost occurred and pain at the fire he had swallowed. Sweat beaded his brow, and he swept it away absentmindedly as he tried to compose himself. The Prima and ambassador both sat staring at him. Waiting for some answer to a question he had not heard. To his shame, his voice broke as he said, "I'm terribly sorry, could you..."

The Prima was up and fussing over him before he could even finish his sentence, pulling him to face her, studying him for any sign of influence. She must have felt the pull of the shade, it had been a tectonic movement for those with the senses for it. It wouldn't have taken much to make the connection. "The boy is overwhelmed. We are asking so much of him. It matters not how great the mind, even the strongest of oxen can only bear so many burdens before they halt. We have given him much to think about and perhaps not enough time to think about it."

The ambassador, not to be outdone in feigning care for him, was at his other side, her callused fingers resting ever so gently upon his sleeve. Warmth without weight. "Do you feel overburdened, Duke Volpe?"

He drew in a steadying breath. Then he told them the truth. “Days ago, I fought an army of dragons to preserve Espher’s sovereignty. This more personal matter scarcely registers, I assure you.”

Gradually the two of them drew back and returned to their seats, though he noticed that the Prima never took her eyes off him for even a moment, as though he might burst into flames at the slightest provocation. He tried, for his part, to keep the conversation moving forward. “The consensus opinion, ladies? Will this work, if I should choose to pursue it?”

“You place me in the awkward position of having to contradict the ambassador, my dear boy, but I find that it is unnecessary.” She gave him a smile, despite the worry still haunting her eyes. To let him know that despite the circumstances, her words were genuine. “Your ascension to the throne in the current circumstances seems to be the most palatable option for all concerned, and I believe that others will see matters in the same light.”

The ambassador looked to be extremely satisfied with that particular answer. For all the fake smiles she had plastered on her face since Artemio first met her, he felt that he could now discern the difference from those few moments when she was genuinely pleased. It could just be a second layer to her deception of course, but he did not think so. To maintain a constant mask on one’s true feelings was exhausting, and the woman had shown a preference for using the truth as a patchwork with her lies to give more verisimilitude.

He almost felt bad to wipe the smile from her face when he asked, “And if the king lives?”

“The Cerva king?” The Prima stared off past his shoulder, to the door beyond, as though she were weighing her options, gauging whether or not she might be heard. “I suppose that would be the first test of your resolve to rule, your willingness to eliminate direct competition for the seat.”

Art’s mouth fell open in genuine surprise. He had never expected anyone to speak so plainly of the death of the twin kings. “If the king lives, you expect me to kill him?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It is something of a tradition when it comes to deposing monarchs.”

“It is treason to even speak such thoughts aloud,” he hissed through his teeth.

“Is it not also treason to take the place of the king? Or does it not become treason until you choose to act on your contemplations?” the ambassador prodded him verbally. Perhaps seeking some small measure of revenge for him interrupting her own happiness. “Is that why you continue to vacillate when the solution is clear?”

“I will not kill a king.” He had thought his temper was under his control. He had thought that a lifetime of beatings for showing the faintest hint of emotion had deprived him of the ability to leap so swiftly to an emotional outburst. But whether it was his own turmoil, or the wrath of The Fire Below that now seared through him, his voice came out in a growl. “I will not become what my father planned for me. I will not become a monstrous usurper. I will not be all that I hate, not even for Espher.”

“You surprise me, Duke Volpe.” The ambassador looked genuinely affronted. As though he was betraying her trust in him. Those words, clumsily chosen by anger, had run contrary to her perception of him. “You have just informed us that you care nothing for the opinions of your peers, but now the thought of being seen as a usurper suddenly troubles you?”

The heat of his wrath still hadn’t left his voice when he answered. “The opinions of others matter as much as bird-shit on the palace walls. But if I see myself as a usurper, it will... trouble me. It will rob me of the moral foundations that I deem required to rule.”

The ambassador scoffed. “But if you can take it all without blood, your objections fade?”

“I... if the king is gone. Then I have no choice but to take the throne. There is no successor and no contender who could unite all factions.” Now that he had recognized the wild anger as an alien thing, he could purge it from his mind, he could push it aside and let the calculating and rational part of him speak while the rest simmered silently, out of sight. “If the king is not gone, then he must rule.”

The Prima inserted herself neatly back into the conversation, deflecting attention from Artemio again. Still protecting him. When he had the opportunity, he would have to thank her for all that she’d done this day. Assuming they both survived. “So, it seems that you have a simple task before you, Modesta, simply ensure that the Cerva are dead, and you have a ready-made puppet king.”

Artemio snarled, “I shall be nobody’s puppet.”

“Spoken like one who cannot see the strings.” The Prima sighed. “My dear boy, all of us are bound. Some by ties of blood, of friendship, of honor. It is only by recognizing the myriad directions in which we are being pulled that we gain any semblance of equilibrium and any opportunity at agency.”

Modesta was quick to try to deflect the path his thoughts now took. “You will not be obligated to obey me or any demand of Agrant. In truth, you are doing me a great favor by

placing someone of competence and power at the head of Espher. If anything, would you not say that I am obligated to you?"

The Prima leaned in closer, as though she were whispering something for his ears only. As if the ambassador weren't privy to every word they shared. "Wasn't that remarkably well played? Won't you remember that lack of obligation when the time comes to make decisions about Agrant? Notable in its absence. A reminder of your dear friend Modesta's kindness. A fine thread, to be sure, but one that is sure to be plucked."

"Prima! The very thought that I am attempting to manipulate the duke!" Modesta gasped in dismay. "Artemio, you cannot believe that..."

He cut her off before she could get to the question. He didn't think he could stomach hearing it at that moment. "The point stands, Ambassador. Regardless of your intentions, I will remember your behavior here and it will shape the choices that I make in the future."

"Then all that I can hope is to leave a good impression of myself and the one I represent."

He cut her off before the question a second time. That was probably rude in Agrant, but this was not Agrant, and he could not abide the ambassador begging for his assurance. Not after all she had done. "Something you have been doing quite ably, Ambassador."

She seemed to settle at that. As though what could easily have been a lie had given her comfort. These games of words that they played held so many layers that often even Artemio could not tell for certain which of the many levels he was meant to be engaging upon. Whether he was meant to read deeper into every expression, or to accept at face value what wasn't being told to him. No wonder the Teatro was a full-time job for the nobility of Espher, and no wonder they seemed so utterly devoid of thought beyond its walls. After committing all of their energies to deciphering such situations, it would be remarkable indeed if they had any brain power left to accomplish such simple tasks as walking and talking, let alone all the rest. Artemio was exhausted just from this brief bout.

"Tell me, Duke Volpe, having fully indulged your curiosity with the Prima, do you now feel prepared to make your decision?"

He gave the ambassador an indulgent smile in the hope that it might settle her nerves. "I have but a single question left to ask her. Where is the king?"

Always the Prima held herself with a pride to reflect the majesty of her position. Always she composed herself with dignity. So when he asked her that question and her shoulders slumped,

Artemio knew how much it pained her to give him the answer. “Oh, my dear boy, I wish that I could tell you. I wish that I could say he had died in the fighting or he had fled into exile to hold court in some foreign land, but I cannot give you the certainty that you seek, and I have no way of finding it for you.”

He opened himself up again, not to the Great Shade below, which he was doing his damndest to keep from his mind, but to the shades of the Prima. Just a touch from one of them would let him know that she was dissembling, that she was hiding the truth not from him, but from the Agrantine ambassador. It would have given him somewhere to circle back to. A starting point. She did not give him the faintest touch. Even as he pried.

“Neither shades nor man have brought any information to you that might shed light on his disappearance?”

“Not a whisper. Not a one. And I can assure you that it has not been from a lack of trying on my part.” She reached across her desk once more, placing a hand on his. “The better of my students have all departed to wage your war, the others retreated into their shells, but through every contact and contract I have at my disposal, I have sought this knowledge and found nothing at all.”

He turned his hand until their palms touched. Then they parted. “I have nothing but faith in you, Prima. If you cannot find something, then it cannot be found.”

She met his gaze, despite the prying stare of the ambassador burrowing into the sides of their heads. “It is my hope that you have found what you sought, in coming here.”

“I did, Prima,” he said without a hint at bitterness. “Thank you.”

15 - Overdue Departure
Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

Escaping from a besieged city proved to be considerably easier than Harmony had anticipated. It seemed that all of the efforts of Covotana's invaders were focused upon keeping people out rather than keeping people in. Truth be told, it would most likely be to their advantage to have fewer people inside the walls. When the siege stretched out and food supplies began to dwindle, fewer mouths would prove an immense advantage, particularly mouths attached to bodies that had no intention of assisting in holding the walls.

So it was that when she and the dragon-man had climbed up the steps to the walls after nightfall, the worst of her dizziness and confusion departed at last, the saints standing watch were mostly bemused.

The closer of the two was a woman, to Harmony's eye, scarred all the way up her face and scalp. She came on with considerably more aggression than her partner on the other side, closing the distance and swinging for Kagan without casting Harmony a glance. It was clear which of the two potential escapees was the physical threat.

Which was of course why it was so easy for Harmony's own rapier to slide along the underside of the saint's arm, through the bundled sackcloth of her robe, through skin and breast and muscles before finding its home in her heart.

How easily the saints of Agrant died. Falling back before the pain could even reach her mind. Body robbed of strength as her rich, bright lifeblood splattered out on the stone. Harmony spun to face the next with her glittering rapier in hand, shining red and slick by torchlight.

The other saint did not slow. Bellowing, "Stop!" at the top of his lungs, as though they would dare to stop now. Kagan had his rope secured around the battlements and looked askance to Harmony.

She snapped, "Go."

"Can't leave you here."

"Nor do I expect to be left, but there isn't time for both of us to descend before this oaf arrives to cut the rope, and you stand a better chance of catching me than the opposite, wouldn't you say?"

“Fine.” At least he had the good sense not to argue. Maybe Orsina wasn’t so foolish for making him her impresario after all, if he could be trained.

The next of the saints rushed her with his blade already in full swing. Harmony moved like a serpent, coiling back from the blow and darting forward so swiftly it would have brought a tear to many of her fencing instructors’ eyes to see the perfection they’d wrought.

Sadly, they had been Espheran instructors, not Agrantine. Swiftness could not overcome superior form. Not when there was no element of surprise on her side. With a twist of the wrist, his swing became a parry, and the lightness of her blade, the fineness that brought her so much finesse, suddenly worked against her as it was slapped aside with almost casual ease, leaving her wide open to the counter.

It came swift and brutal, a short chop that hit her in the upper arm as she tried to fling herself aside. It bore down to bone and would have carried on through her if she hadn’t already been traveling the direction it was headed. Despite herself, she let out a howl of pain.

He was over her, with his sword leveled on her toppled body before she had a chance. “Submit.”

That obviously wasn’t an option. She kicked out for his knee, missing but driving him back a step, giving herself a little room to work with. Kagan had to be halfway down the wall by now. She just needed to hold this sword-slinging ape’s attention for a little longer.

“Is it true that in Agrant, they make you lie with your own mothers?”

Whatever martial discipline had been instilled in the saint was no match for the mental image her words provoked. The stern gaze of a seasoned warrior twisted in disgust. She flung herself up. The moment all she needed to meet his rapid riposte with a parry of her own. It knocked her right back down again, but the added momentum gave her distance, put her by the base of the battlements, with solid stone at her back to serve as a support next time she had to try her strength against his.

“Why would say such thing?” His swordplay was markedly better than his Espheran.

Her arm throbbed where the blade had bitten deep. It would need to be stitched. She hated stitches.

“Isn’t it meant to remind you that the emperor gets all the young, nubile Agrantine girls as his brides, and all you have to look forward to is your sagging, old...”

He interrupted the thought before she could complete it, which was a relief because she was becoming queasy trying to conceive of something vile enough to rile him.

The star-steel blade swung down at her with just a touch more force than was strictly required, and she punished his overextension with another kick out at his leg, low in the shin, setting him off balance entirely. She rolled aside, so he struck that fancy sword of his off the stonework, throwing up sparks.

“You die.”

Her bleeding shoulder hit the corner of the battlements, and her whole world washed out in red for one awful moment. But when she came back to herself, she was halfway to her feet, with her ass pressed firmly to the wall for balance.

“We all die, but not all of us return to whence we came. Only you Agrantine boys get to brag of that.”

In his rage, all of his precious training had held up, guiding him through the perfect motions of the Agrantine sword forms. Yet now, as he screamed, “Die!” at the very top of his lungs, she saw him waver. She saw it in the line of his shoulder, in the bend of his arm. He was no longer perfect, and that meant he could be beaten.

She didn’t even try for a killing blow—that would have been folly and overextension of herself. But what she did manage was all the more effective for being so harmless. Instead of striking for his exposed chest, she thrust the tip of her blade into his arm, at the inner join of his elbow.

It was little more than a prick, barely enough to draw blood. In the kind of fencing matches that Harmony had grown up watching and then eventually participating in, it would not have even been considered a touch, yet it was enough to stop his arm from bending, his sword from swinging. Enough of a delay that she could fling herself shoulder-first into his guts and send him toppling back off the wall.

For an instant, there was silence, then the wet crack of head meeting flagstone. She didn’t go to see what damage she’d done. Instead, she sheathed her sword, hopped over the battlements, and began her descent.

Adrenaline ran dry about halfway down the wall, and her firm grasp on the rope became shaky. If it hadn’t been for the solid anchor of Kagan at the wall’s foot, then she might very well

have lost her grip. Instead, she descended through shakes and shudders that she could blame on the cold wind and was more or less herself again by the bottom of the wall.

“Didn’t have to catch you.” For someone so huge, it should have been quite impossible for Kagan to lurk so effectively in the shadows of the wall, yet one moment he was there and the next he was not. Harmony wondered if dragons and their human vassals were like those lizards Art had spent a solid hour obsessed over. The ones that could change color to match their background.

She managed a smile through the pain and shudders. “I can assure you that I’m as relieved as you are. Knowing my luck, you would have dropped me.”

For a moment it looked like he would close the rest of the distance, put an arm around her shoulders, and give her the comfort that she so obviously needed, but he didn’t. Instead, he stopped short and crossed his massive arms across his massive chest. “Wouldn’t have.”

He’d caught himself before he fell into the trap of treating her like Orsina. So she had to give him the same courtesy and stop treating him like Art. “I’m sure you wouldn’t have intended to, but a crossbow bolt would have come lancing out of the darkness, and you’d have to dive aside to avoid it, and I’d have become so much human jam.”

Almost against his will, he cast a glance back at the wall. As if there was some crossbowman lurking up there, just waiting for his opportunity. “Big imagination.”

She put her back to both him and the wall and set off across no-man’s-land. They had nobody raining death on them for the moment, but there was no reason to think that the Agrantine would continue to be so polite, especially with two of their saints dead because of her efforts. “It helps to worry ahead of time when fate seems intent on bending you over at every opportunity.”

All it took was a couple of long strides and then he was by her side, matching her pace. “Seem pretty lucky to me.”

“Because I made it back out of the city that I should be able to call home with barely my life?” She scoffed. “Because my family is such a nightmarish disaster that sending a rat-girl to meet me in the sewers is considered an act of filial kindness? Because I managed to escape with you in tow? You, so wondrous a prize?”

“Because of Orsina.” Kagan’s voice rumbled on her skin, but without that, she might not have heard his answer at all.

“All right, yes. That was very lucky.” She blushed. Then upped her pace to be sure he could not see her face. There were tents and fires up ahead, the soldiers she had been so desperate to avoid before, and that now she didn’t even have a second thought for. They would stop by her tent, if they weren’t stopped before then, to load up on supplies.

They went unchallenged for a fair distance, farther than Harmony had really expected. It wasn’t until they made it to her tent that a guard finally stopped her. “Duchess Volpe! You’ve returned!”

“It shall only be a brief visit, I’m afraid. I have another mission I must undertake with immediacy.”

“Your brother spoke to us from the walls, told us to maintain the siege but not to attempt to break it. Can you tell us any more of his plans?”

She put on as stern a face as she could maintain while watching the rapidly approaching crowd of nobles and secretaries swerve off from their charge towards her at the sight of the dragon-lord at her back. “What he has shared with you is his command, and you’d do well not to question it.”

The Duchess Granchio emerged from the crowd, unbent by the burden of command and undeterred by the sight of one of the Arazi in their camp. “And your mission, your Grace?”

“Were it something that I could share with you, Duchess, I assure you that I would. Simply rest assured that what I am doing is in the best interests of Espher. I leave this army in your capable hands. Maintain the siege until such time that the command comes from Artemio to break it.”

Granchio was not so easily swayed as the other nobles. “And you have decided that this mission is more important than leading the armies of Espher in her darkest hour?”

“My quest will turn this war on its head in an instant.” She said it with such sincerity that even the dubious duchess fell silent.

“I shall need horses, supplies for my journey, and a change of clothing. If you might see to the former for me, I shall see to the latter. See if you can’t get my servant some spears and armor while you’re at it.”

Kagan stepped into her tent with her, still lurking in her shadow. His voice rumbled out into the dim. “Servant?”

“You have a better mask to wear?” she called back over her shoulder, digging into the chest of Art’s clothes in search of anything else a little more practical than her current rags.

It was only when she began stripping off in earnest that Kagan seemed to realize what he was glowering at and turned away. “Not your servant.”

“You know that, and I know that, but there are few roles that the nobility of Espher might see you in and not object to.” She managed to force a shirt down over the massive bruise that her torso seemed to have become. “Servant is one.”

“Tracker.” He grumbled to the tent wall. “Was the king’s huntsman.”

“Ah, but that would lead to questions about what I’m tracking or hunting.” She called back over her shoulder.

“Better than being called a servant.”

She spun him around now that she was fully dressed again. “Oh, I’m terribly sorry to have offended you by suggesting that you aren’t the highest born of all dragon-riders, but I judged the situation to require some degree of finesse.”

He huffed out air. “Next time, you’re my servant.”

She laughed. “Next time?”

“When we’re sneaking into the Arazi camp.” He hoisted the bundled supplies she’d found for herself onto his shoulders. “You can carry my stuff.”

“I’d be delighted to.” She gathered herself before heading back out into camp. “Just so long as you get us there while Orsina still draws breath.”

The gathered crowd had swelled in her absence. All the nobles who hadn’t had the opportunity to stare her down on arrival were now taking their opportunity, and while Duchess Granchio had fetched horses for them as requested, she was now standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the other leaders of Espher in a living barricade.

“Duchess Volpe, we would have words with you.”

Harmony forced a smile onto her face. “So long as they are short words, I will be happy to entertain all of you.”

A whiskered lord that she didn’t recognize grumbled, “I’ve got some short words for you, girl...”

For a moment she felt her world lurch sideways. This would only work if she had their loyalty or had borrowed enough of their loyalty to Artemio. If she was challenged, she had

nothing to fall back on. If she was challenged, she knew she'd fade back to who she was before, the pariah. They had lived all their lives with power as their birthright, and she had lived with nothing but their contempt. She knew just how ephemeral it all was.

Kagan lurched forward from the tent flap to loom over the man. "I beg pardon, my lord, I did not hear your wisdom. Could you speak up?"

Whatever other comment the man had meant to make gave out in the face of the Arazi. Power again. Far from ephemeral. Far from easily dismissed. The power of muscle and bulk. The power of the threat of violence.

She let her hand drift down to rest on the hilt of her sword. No matter the way the world changed around them, there would always be this. If it came to it, she could fight her way through. She could win. That was why she had spent so long in study of the blade. To have that power. That power that could never be taken from her. Compared with the command of armies and the economic pull that the great houses could manage, such power was a tiny thing. But standing face-to-face with her as the fools were now, her power could not be denied.

"You mean to leave us again so soon?" Granchio tried to seize control of the situation again.

"I have my orders from Artemio, as you have yours. House Volpe has no soldiers to command, nor bannermen to call." With the weight of the sword pressing up against her fingers, Harmony found the calm she needed. "All we have is ourselves, and so it is our lives that are being spent. Artemio within the city, and I farther afield."

The whiskery lord managed to muster the courage to speak again, even if he couldn't meet Kagan's eye. "And you truly believe that your actions will have so vast an effect on the conflict as to make this abandonment of your post to be worthwhile?"

"My post is where Artemio sets me," Harmony snapped back before her temper was fully under her control. "And as to the effect of my mission. You saw what happened to the Arazi when one of Artemio's plans came to fruition."

Another noblewoman, younger and probably still knowledgeable about the noble bachelors of Espher, tittered a little as she spoke. "I will admit that I did wonder why that hedge-witch girl had come under his wing. Some thought it was a love match."

"Ha." She couldn't keep from laughing at the thought. "Hardly."

Granchio did not seem to share her amusement. "And you believe that your brother means to pull another miracle from under his hat?"

Shockingly, Kagan was the one to answer that. “There is a reason we all follow him, isn’t there?”

They might have argued among themselves, they might have argued with her, but they could not argue with the specter of her brother. Not after she had tacitly implied that he had been the one to bring Orsina to the peak of power she’d displayed. Not after she’d implied that he’d spent her so easily. These people respected that kind of callous plan. Art’s ability to turn his feelings off and let his mind lead was what made them follow him too.

From there, the fight was out of them. Harmony and Kagan mounted up, checked over their supplies, and set off to the north. It was almost too easy. None of it felt real until the last of Espher’s flags vanished over the horizon at their back, and all that was left in front of them was Espher herself.

Harmony didn’t strictly know how to speak to Kagan. She especially didn’t know how to thank him for piping up to help her back at camp. She opened and closed her mouth enough times that she was starting to consider a new career as a carp. Eventually, she managed to say. “Back there, you...”

He cut her off before she could get any more awkward. “If I don’t save Orsina, I’ll be dead too, right?”

She forced down all her attempts at thanks and managed to splutter out, “Indeed.”

They rode on. There was nothing to do for now. Nothing to say. Nothing to see. Just farmland, well churned by the passage of an army heading north and south again. They could drive the horses a little harder now while they were on the packed earth. It wouldn’t be long before it gave away to little more than hunting trails and the pace would need to slow. At least until they reached the open expanse of the steppes.

Kagan surprised her by keeping the conversation going. Though he seemed more like he was talking to himself. “Not like I’d leave her anyway.”

She nodded her head in time to the rhythm of the horse’s motion. “I’m sure.”

Once more they sank back into silence. Sullen on his part, curious on hers. Eventually she was forced to ask the thing that had been gnawing at her mind since she’d first heard of this Arazi exile. “You aren’t harboring some strange ideas about Orsina, are you?”

He grunted. “Stranger than the reality?”

“Fair play, I should have been more specific.” She wet her lips and blurted the rest of it out as quickly as she could. “I just mean, you’re not for instance an old lover trying to win her back or something along those lines?”

She had to look around when she heard how vehemently he barked back, “No.”

Disgust permeated that one word. As if just the thought of it was sufficient to turn his stomach.

She straightened up. Eyes forward. She could admit to herself that it was a relief, even if his revulsion seemed to be a little much. “Well, all right then.”

“She’s a child,” he rumbled, by way of explanation.

Harmony snorted. “Well, hardly.”

“Known her since she was one.” His chuckle sounded like the grinding of rocks. “Still acts like one.”

The idea of defending Orsina from others had always been on Harmony’s mind. But this certainly was not the manner in which she had expected to do it. This was not the snappish assault of some nobleman questioning Orsina’s manners; it was one of her old friends. Apparently from childhood.

“Now, that seems a little unfair.”

“Not an insult.” He shrugged his shoulders. Every motion slow and exaggerated with his bulk. “Maturity comes with time. She’s never had any.”

They rode on a little farther before he unexpectedly piped up again. “Why do you care?”

“She’s my friend. I care about her?” She cleared her throat. “I wouldn’t want to see someone in your privileged position trying to take advantage.”

His face split into a jagged grin. “Jealous?”

“I’m afraid tall, dark, and scaly isn’t really my type. She’s more than welcome to you if her tastes run that way.”

“You’re friends,” he said with an odd lilt to his voice.

Her eyes narrowed as she called back, “That’s right.”

“Won’t bother you we slept together then?”

She nearly leapt from the saddle in horror. “What?!”

He pointed off to the side of the road. “In that ditch.”

She couldn't help but shout. Even though she realized he was leading her along by her nose. "You did what?!"

"Had to huddle for warmth. Pissing rain." He chuckled. "No inns wanted me."

Harmony swallowed down her irritation. "I'm not entirely sure what you intend to accomplish by riling me..."

He cut her off. All serious, all at once. "She's mine. My... kid. Has been since I met her. Bond just made it official. Stop worrying about her past, worry about her future."

"What future?" she snapped, bitterly. "Incineration?"

"You came for me because you know she's alive. Same as I know." Even his sighs sounded like the shifting of tectonic plates.

"I just don't understand why."

"Why she's still alive?" Kagan looked askance at her.

"The Arazi don't take prisoners." Harmony's gaze dropped to the road once more. "Everyone knows that."

"Everyone who knows that is lying to you." Kagan laughed. "We take prisoners, give them food, shelter, better lives, then they're Arazi."

The thought of Orsina as one those savages riding on a dragon's back flashed through her mind. All that power, turned against Espher. She couldn't even fault the girl for the betrayal. It wasn't as though Espher had ever been kind to her. "So, you suspect that they're trying to convert Orsina to their cause?"

Kagan looked remarkably untroubled by the thought. She supposed he was the last person who had not seen just what his "kid" was capable of. "Nope."

"Do you care to elaborate?" Harmony's sighing was becoming increasingly elaborate as the day went on, no longer just the simple huff of irritation, but now a staccato beat of exhalations.

It took time for him to compose his thoughts, but she had the good sense to wait it out instead of pushing. Eventually he spoke. "Some crimes are too wicked to go unpunished. Worst crime for us is killing a dragon."

Harmony felt a chill settling over her. "She's killed dozens."

"Then they can't let her live."

He said it so simply, like it was a matter of fact. If a stone was thrown in the air, it would fall. If the sun rose, it would set. If someone killed a dragon, they died.

She felt his certainty like a cold weight in the pit of her stomach, but the evidence of her eyes denied it. “Yet the fact that we are having this conversation suggests that not only did they let her live, but they are also continuing to let her live.”

It was his time to huff out his breath. “Think that’s my fault.”

“Well, then I suppose that I owe you my thanks.” She managed a smile despite the dire subject of their conversation. “In what way do you suppose that it is your fault?”

“We’re bonded.” Kagan’s hand drifted up to touch the center of his chest. As though he could feel the bond like some physical thing. “Me and the girl. Same as me and my dragon. If I die, my dragon dies. If she dies, I die. Can’t kill a dragon, so what do you do?”

Harmony’s mouth hung open. “You have had a dragon all of this time, and you were sitting locked up in a villa?”

“She’s... not here.” He trailed off. “The bond’s still... doesn’t matter. She’s far away.”

“A dragon-lord without a dragon.” Harmony pondered. “Isn’t that rather like a dancer without feet?”

He snapped back, “More questions like that and you’ll see how well you wave that needle with no hands.”

“Charming.” She snorted. “This must be the famed Arazi politeness.”

His shoulders had hunched up, and she couldn’t see his face for the bulk of them. “Isn’t rude to say no to being interrogated.”

She guffawed. “Fairly rude to threaten grievous bodily harm though.”

When he cast a glance back at her, there was hate there in his eyes. She had really struck a nerve. Hardly surprising. “You want a sorry?”

“No, you’re well within your rights to threaten me with gruesome maiming. It was... rude of me.”

He grunted. “Famed Espher politeness.”

She couldn’t hold back a laugh. “I can see why she likes you.”

“Can’t see why she likes you,” he said with a growl in his voice. “But I guess we’ll find out what you’re made of. Long road ahead.”

“It feels longer by the moment.” She’d tried to break the ice. She’d tried to be friendly. If he chose to throw it back in her face, that was his mistake. “Have you had any thoughts as to how we will track the Arazi down?”

“Head north. Start at the battle. Follow the trail. Easy tracking. Even you’ll be able to do it.”
She spurred the horse on, slipping by him at a canter. “Then let’s get moving, shall we.”