

Songs of Silk and Sin
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cervi 112

Madrigal Cervi lived, and the one who had ensured that was neither doctor, guardsman or noble. It had required no small part of fast talking on Artemio's part to ensure that Orsina was not dragged along into the ensuing madness of recriminations and terror, making her excuses for her and claiming that she was overwrought by the awful thing that she had borne witness to. She had been almost entirely speechless by the time that he had recovered her from the throne room and shuttled her out to a carriage, but from others he had managed to extract the fullness of the tale.

He had scarcely needed their contributions when every step of the battle was still laid out before him. The scent of stagnant water from Orsina's now familiar shade hung in the air, some pattering down from the ceiling above in droplets.

Nobody had known that Arazi themselves could breathe fire. Artemio himself had been in the presence of one mere days before and never even considered the possibility. Moreover, he'd been in such a position with the dungeon bound Arazi that if that man had been capable of spitting fire in his face he had no doubt that he would have done so. The fact that the king had come within an inch of death seemed to have rattled the hornet's nest of the palace up quite nicely, the fact that it was only blind luck and some untrained girl of no importance who had saved him from his fate was considered to be less a matter for celebration than a damning indictment of the security measures in place.

They'd found the other twin sitting placidly in the solarium after his brother had been fussed over to the limits of his patience, and then all the doctors had been sent away, all the servants, everybody except for Artemio. It was just the three of them now, stewing in a sudden and unexpected silence.

While the injured twin nursed his injured pride with a glass of pale blue wine, the other spoke. "Is it fair to assume that this attempt on the royal self is related to our previous assassinations?"

"No." Artemio sighed. "It would be so much simpler if it were, but I cannot see any connection between the Arazi and our existing troubles."

The wounded king snapped, "Assassination seems a rather clear connection."

Artemio didn't really want to argue with a man who was in a foul mood and capable of having him decapitated with a nod, so he went gently. "The methodology is different."

"We thank you for the presence of your agent in our moment of need, though it would be best in future to work with us rather than independently."

"She... I..." He didn't know how to respond, so he reached for a platitude. "I am glad that she was there."

The wounded king let out a wet little simper of laughter. "As are we all."

Artemio glanced between the two men, still entirely unsure as to why he was there, but almost too worried what the answer might be to pose a question.

When it seemed that Artemio was not going to be the one to break the silence, the clean faced king spoke. "You know that it is a cardinal crime to spill royal blood."

Artemio did not give an answer. He had heard many long rants deep into the dark of night in his childhood about the indelible stain that such an act would have upon the souls of the Cerva family and all of their descendants. Every time that there was misfortune in the kingdom of Espher, it was to that blood curse that Baron Volpe had turned for his explanations.

“In itself, this is a reprobation that has served whoever sits the throne rather well, but it does mean that in certain practical issues we find ourselves struggling.” When it was obvious that Artemio was not grasping his meaning, the king sighed. “When a physician says that bloodletting will help our health and humours, he refuses to be the one who administers it. When a lesser injury might prevent a greater one, our loyal courtiers hesitate. More often than not, we have been forced to turn to one another in times where blood may be spilled and expected our twin to do the necessary.”

Artemio could imagine that such a thing was an irritation, but he still had no clue what it had to do with him until the King lifted a handkerchief from the table beside him and a dagger was revealed. “We are mismatched.”

What was being asked of him struck Artemio like a hammer blow between the eyes. They meant for him to cut the king? To cut his face? “Your majesty, I... is there nobody else who might be able to perform this duty with more surety?”

The injured Madrigal, replied simply, “No.”

His brother added, “Nobody we could trust not to try cutting a little further than is required.”

“Nobody who would not... lose face if the story ever got out.” He smiled a little at his own little joke.

Canticle Cerva caught his gaze. “Nobody but you. Besides, I’m sure your family would be delighted to learn that you had bled the one of the Cerva like you were lancing a boil.”

Madrigal picked up where his brother had left off. “And then there is the matter of blood. It is quite acceptable for those of royal blood to spill that of other royals. There is no taboo.”

The dagger shone in the midday sun. Drawing Artemio closer even as he longed to be anywhere else. It was a tremendous show of trust on the part of the Cerva Kings to offer him this opportunity, even if there were ample reasons that he was the best choice. “I see.”

He was startled out of his reverie when Canticle laid a hand upon his sleeve. “May I speak candidly with you, Lord Volpe.”

Another great honour, far beyond anything his service had earned him. They really were taking Orsina’s actions as a reflection of his own will. Yet another debt that he owed the girl. “Always, your majesty.”

“It is a great shame that your sister was not of age when the time came for us to begin extending our family tree, or that you yourself were not born a girl so that we might have both had one to ourselves.” He gave Artemio a wink that would have bordered upon scandalous if anyone else had seen it.

“Marrying our two lines would have put an end to a great deal of turmoil behind the scenes of Espher’s Teatro. Perhaps next generation another opportunity will present itself.”

Artemio was utterly gobsmacked. The idea that the royal family would even consider bringing his back into the fold, back into the bloodline, it was more than anyone could have expected. It was all

dependent upon his own obedience and success of course, but the prize had never shined brighter than in that moment. "I... thank you, your majesty."

"Now cut me."

Madrigal drew aside the silken bandages that bound his face and turned so that the damage was clear to see, and his twin matched his pose and position with practiced ease. A trickle of blood escaped the jagged wound that had been dealt to him as he irritated it, but it was little more than a teardrop's worth.

The Arazi's blade had thrust in at an awkward angle, the tip had glanced off the cheekbone and then the sharpened edge had slit along the cheek. A crooked injury, but one Artemio felt confident he could mimic. Though of course he had no need to match it perfectly, only to ensure that the scar that was left behind was a match for his brother's.

The swelling and bruising would go down, and only the cuts would persist. Two incisions then, one at the point of impact to mimic the tear from the initial thrust, and another along the length of the cheek. He ran through it in his mind, over and over again until he was certain he could mimic it properly. Then he cast around for something that the king could bite down on. Canticle whispered, "Just do it."

So Artemio obeyed.

His estimation of the Cerva twins had always been influenced by his father's opinions and those of the few who were brave enough to call them allies. The twin kings were soft, weak, spoiled and foppish. They cowered behind the skirts of their family's Agrantine allies and showed no drive to improve the station of Espher in the world. It was an image that they seemed quite intent on projecting. Even in their first encounter with all the doom gloom and threats that they brought to bear, Artemio had never quite managed to take them entirely seriously. They were rulers by birth, not by nature, in his estimation.

Now he was seeing behind the mask. As he pressed the dagger tip into Canticle's cheekbone, the man did not flinch. There was pain evident in his expression, tears gathering in his eye, but he did not pull away. Even as Artemio drew the dagger out and set it for the next cut, there was no suggestion that he stop. To sit there and do nothing while someone cut into you, simply because you had rationally decided that it was the wiser course to be hurt, that took a force of will that even Artemio himself could not have hoped to match.

He finished the cut with a downward twist, keeping it shallow along the length of the cheek as it had been on Madrigal, but then dipping in dangerously close to the jawbone at the end.

Artemio was so intent upon his work that he had not even noticed the blood until Madrigal brushed past him to press a handkerchief in place to stem the red wash. Canticle's cheek was slick with it, his stiff collar stained a startlingly bright fresh cherry red and still he did not flinch. Rather he held as still as he could until Madrigal held up a hand mirror and they could examine themselves side by side.

With his work done, there was no more need to flatter Artemio. Madrigal nodded to him then glanced to the door, dismissing him like a servant. "Send in the physician when you leave."

Obedient as could be, Artemio did just that.

All eyes were upon him as he departed, and he felt certain that everyone must know exactly what had come to pass in the solarium, even if Canticle had somehow made it through his entire ordeal without crying out. The physician would know at least, and he was as gossipy an old thing as had ever walked the earth.

If he was a success in his larger task, then this would be taken as a sign of the King's great faith in him. If he failed, then they had casually found a way to eliminate the only living person to have spilled royal blood. Either way, the Cerva won. It struck Artemio that this had been the case since the moment that he came into their employ.

Striding off from the court until the passages he walked were silent, he found that his thoughts regarding the Cerva had grown turbulent. They were more than they had pretended to be, and the things that he had taken for simple factors of the situation that they were all in now seemed to Artemio to be deliberate decisions upon their part.

He ducked behind a tapestry and into the servant's tunnels, then made all haste through them towards the Rose Garden.

The failures of the two dead scions of noble houses who had preceded him might not have been the unfortunate result of incompetence, but rather a series of political manoeuvres. Their families had been prominent enough to warrant some attention from the court and the potential to advance themselves, but not so powerful that there would be any sort of consequences for the Kings if they failed to protect them. Seeking the best person for the job had only come later when Artemio himself was produced by the Prima of the House as a candidate. Another one who could be spent without consequence.

There were servants moving about back here even when the public halls stood empty, and it was a unique experience for Artemio to be the one flinching away from their approach, ducking into cupboards or stairwells to avoid crossing their paths.

Was it his competence that had made him their inquisitor, or the political gain that the kings would receive? Either he failed as all others had and a rival to the throne was eliminated, or he succeeded and the kings could show that they had tamed the wild Volpe. He had considered his precarious position to have been an advantage to the kings, but now he truly wondered if it had been their sole reason for choosing him.

All of which begged the greater question of whether the kings wanted these assassinations to be halted or not.

When he reached the outer wall of the palace, he strode up the stairways to the rooftop gardens with a surety of direction that none could have expected from him. The only time that he had ever spent in the palace had been in the past few months and it had been very deliberately limited to the areas furthest from the royal chambers. His grandfather's memories were fragile as bubbles of blown glass, touched to hard they would fragment into nothing, but so long as he gave them no concentration, merely letting his feet lead him, they were his to use.

When he had asked in the very beginning who benefitted the most from having the nobility of Espher unstable, there had been one very obvious answer overlooked. When all of the noble houses were fearful, they looked to the kings for leadership and protection. Even rebellious Dukes and half-feral

country Ladies could be brought to heel under such circumstances, and there was no denying that the Cerva had no shortage of those to be dealing with.

Before, he had been treading carefully so as not to tip his hand to the assassins and their backers, but now he had to wonder if the ones who had set him the task even wanted it completed. They had a constant and full accounting of his motions so that they could strike him down if he drew too close to the truth. They had the resources to make seemingly impossible things happen and while he could see no clear pattern to the deaths that had occurred so far, that did not mean that they were random. Only that the choices that were being made were according to some rules that he did not understand. Even if they were truly random, striking factions both loyal and wavering, they would have the same effect.

Until he had looked into Canticle Cerva's eyes as he cut into his face, Artemio would never have thought the foppish buffoons on the throne to be capable of such a deception, but now he found that he was beginning to doubt the very foundations that his entire quest had been built upon.

If the kings had meant for him to fail, then they could not have set him up for it more efficiently than they already had. The fragmented information left behind, the constant threat of death, enough authority to put him in the way of harm with not nearly enough to protect himself from it.

Bisnonno Fiore was standing ready when he reached for him, granting him eyes on the other side of the gilded wooden door at the top of the stairs. The chaos that was sweeping through the palace below had not reached these heights. Indeed the few guards strolling around the walls were looking out over the city rather than turning their attention inwards to the doors. They were so deep into the maze of the palace that a whole army would have to fall before an enemy could make it through to this place.

With the choice of literally anyone in the Kingdom to seek out the mysterious assassins, the kings had chosen him. He was confident in his intellect, but he could not believe that there was not a single person more qualified. Indeed he was only a student in the House of Seven Shadows while there were a multitude of graduate Shadebound at their beck and call. More and more this began to feel like a trap that he had only just noticed closing around him.

Still, this was all supposition and fearmongering. What he needed was evidence. If he could find enough proof that the kings were behind the assassinations themselves, then Artemio could use that information as blackmail to halt their crimes, or to at least claim his just rewards for resolving the mystery.

There was a chill that came to him when Bisnonno Fiore rode him. Not the cold of the grave, but a certain calmness of thought that he could not achieve independently. It let him consider the options available to him without the burning rage at his heart taking hold and guiding his hands. Mother was one of the victims of this plot. The idea of coming to a compromise with her killers should have appalled him. But what was the alternative? Declaring war upon the Cerva? They had the whole Kingdom of Espher at their beck and call, and enemies pressing in on every side that would sweep through and leave the victor of any internal squabble as the king of naught but ashes.

Perhaps someday, there would be a time when these things were not true, and Artemio could avenge himself on the Cerva, but until that day, he needed the cool touch of the last true king of Espher on his fraying resolve.

When Fiore's senses confirmed that the guards were as far from the entrance as their patrol would take them, Artemio stepped out into the Rose Garden. At once his senses were overrun by the beauty. A dozen different floral delights swept over his nose, the pristine white stone of the walkways was surrounded by rich dark earth, but only glimpses of it could be seen through all of the innumerable flowers that were cultivated here. Fiore's memories of this place were strange and shrunken, but filled with delight. He had played here as a child, long before the throne, before his betrayal and his death. Artemio let him slip away, he had no time for nostalgia and he had pared back his own emotional outburst enough that he was merely stomping forward into this place of beauty instead of razing it to the ground.

What he needed before he could act upon any of his suspicions, one way or another, was proof. To find that proof, he needed to find someone who was close to the Kings, but who hated them with such a passion that it would not matter to them if the truth reduced the whole Kingdom to cinders so long as the Cerva burned first.

When he rounded the next bend in the path, he dropped smoothly into a bow, startling the queen from sniffing at a particularly luscious bloom. "Your majesty."

Cadence Cerva turned to face him with surprise evident on her face. According to Fiore's reconnaissance, her ladies in waiting were scattered around the place in various states of drunkenness, unable to keep up with the gruelling rate at which their mistress ploughed through the wine cellars that the Volpe had spent centuries filling. They were alone, with no chaperone, and Artemio couldn't even begin to bring himself to worry about the potential scandal. He still had her husband's blood on his cuff. Anything he did or said would be less scandalous than that.

Her cheeks were flushed, from the sun or the wine, he could not say, but she did not seem entirely concerned by his sudden appearance. "To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit, lord..."

"Artemio Volpe," He dipped a little lower in his bow, lower than he had ever bothered for her husband. Or should he say husbands. "I am your majesty's inquisitor."

That seemed to spark some interest at least. Cadence had started out her gilded life far from Espher, to the south. A princess of some vassal kingdom of Agrant or another. Her age, station and temperament had made her an ideal match when the time came for the Cerva to marry, and the choice of her over all of the locally sourced desperate single noblewomen had been quite a statement about where the loyalties of the royal family lay. She had been the Agrantine Emperor's choice.

"And what are you being inquisitive about in my garden?" She asked with a smile.

"Why, the fairest rose of them all." From the fall of her face, he could see that had been the wrong answer. False flattery would have been so commonplace to any queen as to have no hope of success, but for this particular queen, chosen almost exclusively for her beauty, trapped in her gilded cage because she was such a pretty little thing, it was taken like a slap across the jaw. She took a step back from him and he was forced to dip his head down once more. "Forgive me, your Majesty. I meant no offence. My mother often said that my runaway mouth would be the death of me."

She seemed to soften a little at that, but trust wasn't forthcoming. He'd arrived here unannounced without a single guard or attendant in tow, cornered her where nobody would see them talking, it was all very suspicious. "No forgiveness is necessary, Lord Volpe. It takes more than a silvered tongue to ruffle my feathers."

Given all that she had endured since her wedding and coronation, he could believe it. The people of Espher were not much taken with their new queen, and the living arrangements that she had to suffer through did nothing to improve her standing. Rumour had it that both of the Cerva Twins took turns playing at being her husband and she could not tell them apart, even in the sheets. The more sordid rumours spoke to the carnal appetites that she must possess to demand the constant attentions of not one but two men, but most of polite society discarded such tales out of hand. The common folk did not. She was the subject of many a bawdy tavern song. To make matters worse, it seemed that all of the fornication that she was assumed to be undergoing was entirely unproductive. Not a single heir had been sired by either one of the men who claimed to be her husband. Unlike the carnal aspects of the royal triangle, the matter of heirs did draw rumours out in high society. The currently circulating suggestion, recounted by the rat-maid under duress, was that the queen was known to be barren before the wedding and placed in Espher to stunt the continuation of the royal line. Though that seemed so preposterous that even Artemio could not give it any credence.

"I have some questions for you, my lady. With regards to the assassinations that I am sure your husband has spoken."

She flicked open a fan and began to flutter a breeze on herself though the midday heat had scarcely had time to begin building. Mostly she seemed to use it to hide her face from his stare. "And what would I know of any of that? Potted wallflower of the court that I am."

"You would know what is spoken of behind closed doors, and when." He tried to catch her eye, to convey his meaning without having to resort to spelling it out. "You would know if his Majesty had discussed matters with you relating to these assassinations that cast... suspicions in your mind."

At last she seemed a little more intrigued than concerned. "Is there something that you fear you have not been told?"

"There are a great many things that I have not been told, your Majesty. The question that troubles me is whether any of those untold things are liable to rear up and kill me the moment my back is turned." He gave a self-deprecating smile and she seemed to warm to him once more.

Even if her tone did not shift from nasal and distant, at least her words seemed to come more freely "And you expect me to give you answers?"

"Who might know your husband's mind as well as you?" There was a tightrope that he had to walk here, letting her know that he understood how injured she had been by her husbands' choices without giving any hint of disapproval towards his monarch. His position here was extremely precarious, and with just a word about this little visit she could end his life quite easily.

Her eyes narrowed, but it was safe to assume that she had taken his meaning clearly. She offered him a hand and after bowing once more to place a kiss on her knuckles, she tightened her grip and led him along through the rosebushes until they emerged at a little fountain that was struggling to maintain any

pressure after the water had been pumped so high. At least there was nothing splashing on their backs when she settled them both side by side on the rim.

“My husband is not always at his most talkative when he visits with me. Perhaps I pry too much for news. Perhaps he simply does not want to lay conversational traps for the next exchange of places.”

He was briefly stunned by her candour, but a moment later he found his words once more. “Apologies, your grace. I had not anticipated that their safeguarding of their identities continued behind closed doors.”

“There are no closed doors when you are a king. Every matter is a matter of import to the court. There are chambermaids, physicians, guards, eyes everywhere.” She looked off towards the sky. “At least they are gentlemen about it, they take turns. They allow me the illusion that they might be one and the same man.”

There was nothing that could be said to that, and any question he might make about the matter would be prurient. Could she tell her husband from his brother? Artemio did not want to know the answer. He’d never taken the queen into his estimations often, but in all the barbarity hidden under silk within court, he wondered if her degradation might not be the most foul. She had been candid with him, so it was the least he could do to return the favour, even if it sank him ever deeper into danger. “I believe that your husband and his brother to be capable of arranging these assassinations to keep the houses of Espher off balance. I do not know if they are the guilty parties, but any evidence that you can provide me that might sway my thoughts one way or the other would be greatly appreciated.”

Her lips were pursed, but she was not screaming for a guard. “As I said before, they tell me little.”

“Yet even if they themselves say nothing, there is, as you so rightly observed, an entire frothing hive of courtiers and servants surrounds them. Men and women that must surely be known to you by now. People who may not have been in their favour prior to the assassinations, who now seem to have their ear.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Other than yourself?”

“Obviously.”

She did not take offense at that, which was purely luck, but she did turn her gaze from him once more. “I shall have to think on it.”

Artemio did not grit his teeth, or make anything resembling a complaint, one did not demand of a queen, one begged. “If it pleases your majesty, I can be reached at the House of Seven Shadows. Perhaps through the Prima?”

“If the opportunity presents itself, I should be delighted to write to you Lord Volpe, though you may find my communiques come through the Ambassador Modesta.”

He forced a smile. “Then you have my undying appreciation.”

There was a little tug at the side of her mouth, as though she had almost smiled, but it was gone as soon as it appeared. “Now perhaps it is best for you to depart.”

He ducked into an awkward little bow that conveniently kept him out of sight of the patrolling guards on the wall. "As you wish, your majesty."

"And if you should feel the need to contact me again so directly, might I suggest that you do so in a less direct manner? I do have all manner of servants and courtiers myself, every one of them absolutely bereft of subterfuge due to my lack of political involvement. You may very well make their day a little brighter."

He didn't laugh, but he was finding himself won over by this woman far too swiftly. Perhaps she was not so divorced from the matters of court as she pretended. Perhaps she was the hand behind the assassins raking her kingdom. Artemio would find out soon enough. If she were the ringmaster of that particular circus, he could expect to be hauled in front of the courts for his scandalous behaviour in seeking this audience sooner rather than later.