

Salting The Cut
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The journey south had always been joyless. A return to the isolation of Father's little rural lordship and all of the rules and strictures that came along with it. In Covotana, they had to conduct themselves impeccably so that they did not bring disrepute on their family, but the Cut was another thing entirely. All eyes were upon Artemio and Harmony, day and night. There was no moment when they could breathe easy. No time when Father would not be informed of a single hair out of place.

From the perspective of a grown man, it was obvious to Artemio that his father's omniscience within his domain was greatly exaggerated. Not every peasant was on the man's payroll, except in the most indirect of ways, and not every servant would run off to tell on them the moment that they made an uncouth comment or joke in the privacy of their own rooms. Yet the illusion was rooted in reality. Father only needed to catch them acting up once in a blue moon to convince them that he could see them all the time.

Artemio still had a switch scar across the back of his left thigh. Small enough that it would never be questioned. Positioned such that nobody in public would ever know of it. Yet when Artemio turned the wrong way at the wrong time, he could feel it pull. So too was father's attention felt. Absent, except for when it was least expected or welcome.

On the subject of unwelcome and unexpected things, here Artemio came, heir to all that he surveyed, master of nothing. Least loved, firstborn son of Count Volpe. At least people had some fondness for Harmony. Her kindness was a well-known temper to her father and brother's harshness. Her mother had been the one to carry baskets down to the farmers struck destitute by bad harvests come midwinter. Harmony had been the one to toss out copper coins as their carriage rolled through the town. A smile from her got them beds for the night, while a smile from Artemio brought nothing but fearful looks. For the longest time, when he was a young boy, he'd been convinced that he was hideous by the reaction of the girls about the villages. That was before he heard the lurid tales of young lordlings running rampant through their own domains. His father hoarded respect like a miser, and left only fear for his son.

Their passage took a week and a half, with rare stops to change out horses as they tired. It passed like a dream, the rocking of the carriage on the barely paved roads of the south lulled both the Volpe siblings in and out of consciousness. The land of their childish dreams, the only world they knew, golden farming country that kept bellies filled from here to the steppes. The gold they remembered, the mud and shit seemed to have passed from their recollections somewhere along the line.

It wasn't that either one of them grew homesick. Home was where their parents lived, and nothing short of literal torture made that sound like a more palatable option than anywhere else in the world. It was simply the blindness of familiarity. Before their year in the city, these delightful aromas were the norm, unnoticed. Now that Artemio knew better, he wished that he didn't. Knowledge wasn't power, it was suffering. He could have happily gone his whole life not knowing that only his little slice of Espher stank of dung.

Most nights they did not stay at an inn, or even in the common room that town aldermen set aside for visitors or travellers. They would have had to push to be accommodated, and neither one of the Volpe children had the energy for it. Not when they already knew the trial by fire that they would soon have to endure.

When father was calm, he was a living nightmare to deal with. How he would behave now, with the only person in the world who had seemed to keep him sane and stable gone, neither one of them dared to even guess.

The Cut rang long and dry across the southern border of Espher, and above it on the highest peak to be found in these lowlands, looming like some great dark dicing cube dropped by gaming gods above was the Osservatore. Home to them both for many years. Though it had never felt so much like home as Artemio's little suite in the House of Seven Shadows had come to.

If their travel had been solely for the stated purpose of mourning, then Artemio doubted that either he or his sister could have forced themselves up the steps into the un-liveried carriage. Even the odious drag of duty wouldn't have stirred him were it not for the very specific reward that he meant to reap ahead of time.

They rode on past their family's seat of power, the village, all signs of hearth and home, then rolled on along the Cut. For as long as Espher had been, this southern border had lain here, and while in times of peace and prosperity there was little here but crops and swine, when the drums of war were beating to the South there had been walls and towers. Ruins now, long left to go to dust and desolation, but a common place for a boy who wanted to be out from underfoot to go roaming when he knew he'd be getting a switching regardless of how early he came creeping back.

It was to these dusty relics of a martial past that they travelled now. Most were little more than moss-clad heaps of buried stone. Little bumps on the horizon that scarcely warranted note. Their final location was more, and less.

If the young Artemio Volpe had not been so attendant to his history lessons, then he would not have known that there was a stricture to the construction of the border watch towers. If he had not been so neglectful of his other lessons, then he would never have had the opportunity to count out his paces and calculate where the missing tower on the crest should have stood.

Back then when he'd been barely up to his father's chest, the prospect of exploring some forgotten tower, lost to the ages had seemed romantic, like he was one of the historians he was forever reading about uncovering secrets of the past. In reality it had been thick with spiders and the walls seemed to sweat mud as he dug his way down into a half-collapsed stairwell.

He re-tread his steps up the hillside now, the placement still fixed in his memory. The main difference this time was not his longer gait, or the knowledge of what had made his last visit such a font of childhood nightmares, it was Harmony at his side. She caught his elbow when his elbow turned on a buried bit of masonry, she shared a terse smile with him when he felt his nerves beginning to prickle. It had been so long since his last visit to this broken place that he almost felt like it had been a fever dream he was recalling through a haze.

Yet there the hole in the dirt was, down under the roots of an old bent elm, and here he found his feet carrying him down onto the rot marked wood that had once been oiled and maintained by knights of the realm.

Harmony caught his collar when the step beneath him began to creak alarmingly. "If you fall down and die, I'm going to laugh at your funeral, just so you know."

"Best make sure that I don't fall then." Normally he would have had some witty quip to bat back to her, to keep their minds off of the matter at hand, but with Mother's funeral already on his mind, it was difficult to muster any humour about the whole subject.

The last time he had come by, there had been excitement bouncing Artemio down each of these steps and he had only a child's weight for them to bear. Now every step was painstakingly applied, a test of strength and of his will to go on. Harmony would never let him live it down if he retreated here on the doorstep of destiny. He would hear about his fear of the dark for each day of the rest of his life.

The air turned from the warmth of the sun-stroked fields to damp mud as they descended, and for a time Artemio truly doubted himself. He truly wondered if his childhood adventure had been imagination taking flight. The stairs shone beneath him with a silica wash. Limestone somewhere beyond the dirt leaking out shimmering stone to encase everything in its crust. Then the air began to dry and his hair began to crisp. In keeping with the theme of childhood games, Harmony whispered, "Getting warmer."

There were ruined towers all along the crest, but this missing one was at the heart, important enough to be broken down, whether by invaders or those who had abandoned it. Once there may have been barracks arrayed around it, the tower may have stood broader and prouder, boasting heraldry and artillery, it may have hosted the Shadebound who came to serve here in comfort. There was no way to know now the tower was down and only these foundations remained, sunk deep into the clay-rich earth of the Cut and showing only when the hot days of summer warmed the stone enough to blight the growth of grass above. Here and there on the wood, stone and leaking mud, orange rust shone out. Iron turned to crumbling nothing. Heat still rising with each step.

Harmony halted at the base of the stairs to try and get a tinder spark to jump into an oil lantern, but Artemio moved on, seeing with things other than his eyes. He could feel the hammer on the anvil. Hear the heaving of the bellows. The heat faded now. Barely an afterthought to the churn of muscle, metal and motion. His nose filled up with soot and his hands tremored with the impacts.

Down and down into the dark he strode, and the shade beneath the tower lay waiting. Steel thrumming all about it.

There were many things that were taught in the House of Seven Shadows about binding a Shade. About forging a contract that has no loopholes, about a reasonable rate of exchange, life for power, based on the rarity. For his part, Artemio already had one very advantageous partnership worked out down to the fine details, but it had not been like this. There had been no approach, no danger, when he met his grandfather's shade. It had all been arranged for him.

The thing that they never taught him in the House of Seven Shadows was courage. In lecture halls and dusty books, confronting a Shade in its lair was as simple as walking in, there was no dread, no sizzle as

eyelashes were licked with heat. Apprehension crawled up Artemio's throat as he went deeper into the ruin, to where the old forge had stood, and the old blacksmith now lingered.

Last time he'd turned back before now. Last time, he'd heard the anvil thunder. He'd learned much since his first time here, enough that he had to force his mind open to let the forge spirit in.

His voice came out a croak in the heat. "I'm here to make you an offer."

Some shades held a fragment of the mind of the person they had been, they could not think, but they could communicate in a manner that made things easier on the Shadebound. Others, like this flagging and ancient spirit, had lost that mask of humanity.

It was a being of hunger and want. All it had was the heat of its flames, and all it longed for was fuel to burn. All in all, a very straightforward transaction. Probably simpler than the arrangements that he had made with Fiore. The only trouble was fixing values. When he fed it a taper of minutes, I tried to gulp down an hour. When he withdrew to protect his reserves, it flung out heat and flapped in a tantrum.

There were places where Harmony could not follow him, and as soon as she realised that a shade did lurk in this overgrown mess of a basement and not just in her brother's imagination, she took to her heels.

Flames flared out from the shadows. Soot lines scorched out where she would have been. On and on it seemed to go, Artemio's soft voice mumbling out questions without answer and the roar of the furnace. Each time that the flames flared, she almost leapt in to save him. Every time, she held herself back from a battle she had no way of influencing, let alone winning. This was what she feared, more than anything else. Not the dark or the fire or the danger, but standing back helpless, unable to touch a thing while Artemio faced it all himself.

She had known that she would feel this way, he had known she would feel this way, but neither one of them would have dared to suggest that she stay behind. No matter what happened, they were in this together. Even when it made her grind her teeth together to keep from crying out.

Slowly, painstakingly, the flares began to slow. Artemio's mumbled words to himself crept to a halt too. The air around them went from scorching, to warm and finally down to the cool and dank that it should have been from the start.

When Artemio came back to her, he looked ragged and exhausted. There were lines around his eyes that had not been there before, and fresh strands of grey hidden amidst the red of his hair. Yet he was not burned, and he had a smile on his face as he staggered up to her. "You got it?"

His breath smelled of coal dust and iron as he did his perfect impersonation of their father "The task was accomplished."

She had to half-carry and half-drag him back up the rotten stairs. Every one of them creaking beneath their feet as the cold that had long been held off them began to creep in. There would be no more children's stories about fairy fire drifting around this old ruin now. No shade haunting it. Not now that it had been taken, and tamed and bound. When their skin touched, Artemio felt feverish, but Harmony knew that it would not last for long. Just as the chill had not clung to him when father forced him down into the basement to receive his first Shade beyond that first shaking night.

The carriage driver stared down at them with unabashed interest as they returned, but he was not fool enough to speak. And as glaring as his interest in them was, it was still a footman's interest, not an educated gaze. He did not spot the three shadows that Artemio now cast. Before the sun had even touched on the horizon they were on their way once more. Trundling back along the road to the only keep in miles.

The Volpe flag hung at half-mast atop the battlements of the Osservatore. The familiar icon of a golden fox above a triple peaked mountain on a deep red. The less polite sectors of polite society would have said that it was a fox driven out into the high hills after its den had been taken, but having seen the Twin King's crown up close, Artemio now recognised it all too clearly in the heraldry. The sigil of his family was a fox that was above the crown.

Everywhere else that Artemio's eyes turned there was black cloth strung. When Cleto Volpe mourned, the whole land mourned with him or showed merriment at their own peril. Even the guardsmen who halted their carriage wore a black band around their arms to show their own sorrow. Lowborn men that his father had hauled up from men at arms to minor knighthoods. The closest that the king in exile could muster to a real court.

Artemio drew in a deep exhausted breath, then let his all his anger at Father wash away. It would not serve him well in this place. A frown at the wrong time, a word out of place, anything might condemn him and put his mission in jeopardy. He could not risk it. Civility was a mask, but it was armour too. So long as he maintained appearances his enemies could not work against him openly either. He wondered for a brief moment if this was actually a lesson that his Father had been trying to impart to his children through his actions or just a side effect of the razor edge that the man lived and thrived on.

It could be read either way, but through all of his life, Artemio had chosen to think the worst of Father. Perhaps now, with the man broken and beaten, he might find some kindness to show to his children. Perhaps the pigs in the pen at the bottom of the hill would take flight.

Through the shrouded halls they followed after the castellan, his red robes dyed quite permanently black. Perhaps the colour of death was more apt for a house in perpetual decline. Perhaps the castellan simply did not believe that the mourning period would end before he joined the Contessa in the grave.

Father was stationed behind his desk, as he ever was. Like a spider at the heart of some great web. He did not look up from the letter he was writing. "I did not summon you."

How could anyone fail to love a man so abundantly loving to his children.

Artemio was the eldest, the unenviable task of conversation fell to him. "Nor did you inform us of mother's death. In your silence, we were forced to assume that you had been rendered incapable of scribbling a missive."

"Do not think to lecture me on niceties, boy." Father's eyes flicked up just long enough to impart a withering stare. "You have no standing."

Even after all the hard years of training, Artemio could not bite back his anger. It was a fatal flaw, of that he had no doubt. Already it had brought him within a breath of the headsman too many times. "Ah yes, my intolerable rudeness certainly entitles you not to even tell us that our mother is dead."

Harmony stepped in front of her brother and spoke up, as if she might drown Artemio out. "Father, we did not know what state we would find you in. Artemio and I both feared that you may be too overwrought to write, and that is why we came. To be here for you in this trying time."

"I do not need you." Cleto returned to his writings. "I do not want you."

Even knowing how stupid it was, Artemio could not let such words pass. "Usually that is the subtext of our conversations, rather than outright stated. Are you certain that you are alright father, your subtlety seems to be slipping."

"Still your viper's tongue before I have it set to an anvil and stilled permanently."

The old man's eyes locked with Artemio's and the only thing that he could see was hate. The only emotion that the son was certain that the father was truly capable of. The only time that he knew Father wasn't performing to elicit the desired response. Good.

He clapped his hands. "And we're on to usual threats of gruesome violence. You see Harmony, he is fine. Just the same as always. We were fools to worry for him."

"Will you be silent." Spittle misted out from Cleto's pursed lips. Speckling his precious papers. Perhaps he truly was overwrought. That was the most that Artemio had ever gotten out of him. It actually succeeded in shutting him up for a moment.

Harmony hopped into the conversation again before things could go any further downhill. "Whether you have called for us or not, we are here for you Father. Whatever we can do to ease your suffering, all you need do is ask."

"Then heed my wishes and depart." The cold mask slid right back into place. His attentions turned back to his blotter. "I have no use for children underfoot."

Even if he used the word to be dismissive, it was nice to be acknowledged as Cleto's children at all. Sometimes it had been difficult to draw even that much connection to the man. Admittedly, it just went to prove to Artemio that he would never be seen as anything more than a mewling babe by the man, but it was something.

Something that Harmony was swift to latch onto. "Of course, Father. We do not mean to impose on your time. Now that we can see that you are well, we shall depart with all haste."

"My health does not falter. Nor does my focus." The scratching of quill to parchment resumed. "Is that well enough to sate your prying?"

Harmony had always been better than the rest of them at letting Father's words wash over her. Eventually they would erode her stony resolve, but in the short term at least, she could endure. Ignoring the question, she posed on of her own. "Might we spend the night at least? It is a long road from here to Covotana."

"You do not need to tell me, child. I know all too well how far we have fallen from Covotana."

"So supper then?" She gave him a smile. Her mother's smile. Soft as a feather's brush. Barely there if you did not look for it. Cleto looked for it.

He sighed. "If we must proceed with this farce, have the boy keep his lips sealed. I shall suffer no more insult in my own hall."

Artemio opened his mouth, only to slam it shut again as Harmony's heel pressed down into his foot. She answered smoothly for the both of them. "As you wish, father."

Those magic words did the same trick that they always had. Cleto returned to his all important work and his children were shuffled out with all haste. This was when mother would be there. Not to comfort them, never to comfort them, but to reinforce whatever lesson father had been trying to instil. To use softness and cajoling to convince them that their punishment was just and righteous.

As Artemio paused there in the hall, waiting to hear the click of heels and the subtle insinuations about keeping his snideness to himself. It did not come.

The weight of the moment, the darkness of the hall, it all seemed to come crashing down on him. He scrabbled for Harmony's hand and discovered to his surprise that it was already held out for him. They did not weep together, for it would displease father for his children to show weakness, but they clung tightly to one another's hands as they set out towards their old rooms, trailing behind the castellan once more.

Years. It had been years since they'd walked these cold halls, clinging to each other for comfort, yet here they were again. Nothing changing but the drapes. Old instincts came to the fore. To put on a brave face for his sister and make believe that everything was going to be alright. "Nice to see that becoming a widower hasn't made him any less of a bastard."

Harmony managed to twist her strangled laugh into a mortified gasp, even as the castellan's ear pricked up. "Artemio!"

"No, no, I really mean it. Can you imagine what it would have been like if he'd tried to comfort us? If he'd smiled? I would have shit myself on the spot. It would be a sign of the end times."

This time Harmony had to bite her knuckles to keep the laughter contained. She looked at him with pleading eyes. One more push and she'd burst out laughing and the shade of mother would burst out the wall, shrieking about decorum.

Artemio wet his lips and let the smirk fade away. "I mean it, I'm glad that he hasn't changed at all. At least that means we don't have to worry about him."

She very carefully avoided the true meaning of that statement. That he didn't care if the old bastard lived or died, choosing instead to pretend that Artemio was praising the old man's persistence of character. "He has always been able to take care of himself."

"Were it but a few weeks ago, I'd have said that he was able to take care of mother too, but..."

The castellan turned on him with a gasp of dismay. "My lord!"

For an instant Artemio's mind went blank then the name sprang up in him. "No need to stand on formality Cesare, we've known each other too long for that."

"Your poor father has suffered..."

Artemio cut him off with a sneer. "A fraction of what he gladly doles out on others. Yet you expect me to feel even a glimmer of sympathy for the man?"

The castellan rallied admirably with a fresh onslaught. "The Contessa would not stand for you to speak of him so."

"Perhaps if he'd performed his duties as the ward and protector of this household with more vigour she'd be here to tell me so herself." Artemio snarled.

"How dare you speak of the Count in such..."

The old servant's collar was bunched in his fists and Artemio could not recall having snatched it. "I dare, my puttering old friend, because unlike you and the other poor souls trapped under his yoke, my fate is not beholden to this crumbling edifice or the monster that dwells at its heart."

Harmony's hand was on his arm. Not nearly as gentle as it appeared. He could feel the strength behind the grip. It brought him back to himself. "I... I'm sorry. The news came as a shock to me. I have not had much success in setting my mind at ease since I heard. You are right enough Cesare. Harmony. Both of you. I should not speak ill of the man, certainly not under his own roof. He has just lost his wife in the most barbarous way that I could imagine."

"As it should be. My lord." Cesare seemed to deflate back down to his usual proportions. All his righteous anger fleeing and propriety stamping it back behind the wall.

Artemio pushed the advantage. "Tell me, Cesare, I know that he puts on a mask of strength so that we do not worry..." Harmony made a sound like she had choked. "How has he been sleeping since it happened?"

"Ah, well. Well enough I suppose." Tight lipped as always. It seemed that every grain of information would have to be extracted manually.

"Which chambers has he taken?"

"The green room on the second story, so at least he does not want for comfort."

There was a lapse for a moment as Artemio tried to consider the best way to phrase his next question. "I wonder if you might do me a favour, Cesare?"

"So long as it please my lord," Now there was an important caveat. "I am at your disposal."

"We have had no chance to mourn. We only just learned of the tragedy a few days hence." Harmony glanced sideways at him as he laid it on thick. "Might we see where it happened?"

"What? My lord, that is...obscene." Cesare had actually flushed beneath the layer of powder he still applied to his face, chasing the fashions of court from decades before. "There is a mausoleum being prepared in the west gardens that shall hold your mother's remains, but I cannot think why you would want to..."

"Because I want to know what happened to her. Not the rumours and lies being spread about court, nor the abridged version that father would share with us to protect us. I need to know what became of my

mother, or I shall know no peace." Artemio forced his voice to crack and tried to force out a tear. "You can understand that, can't you, Cesare?"

"The investigation..."

Even biting the inside of his cheek had failed to elicit a tear, so Artemio switched to barely contained rage. He didn't even need to fake that. "May never be resolved if this is like any of the other...killings of this sort. I need something now to set my fevered imagination to rest."

"My lord, what remains in their chambers, it would do quite the opposite. I saw... I saw too much when first I heard your father cry out for aid."

"Cesare, you are a loyal man, as good a servant as anyone could ask for and it is my hope that when the burden of leadership passes to me some distant day in the future, you will still be here to help me shoulder it. Yet for all of that, you are not of our blood. You do not know the burden of our blood, nor the things that it allows us to do. If you do not let me into the chamber, then you are taking from me my final chance to speak with my mother." It was a lie, of course. Any echo of the Contessa was long gone by this point. But the common man knew nothing of shadecraft. "Do you understand what you are taking from me with your denial? Would you do that, to me?"

The Castellan's objections crumbled in the face of the combination of emotional appeal and threat. "Your sister..."

Artemio lay a comforting hand on the old servant's shoulder. "I would not inflict such sights upon either one of you, my old friend." He gave the shoulder a squeeze, struggling to even find the cadaverous form of the man beneath the layers of padded cloth required to survive in the perpetual chill of the Osservatore. "All that I require is for you to unlock the door and depart."

It was clear that Harmony was unhappy to be sent on her merry way, but he thwarted her attempts to nudge him with an arm wrapped around her waist. He leaned in close to hiss in her ear. "You do not want to see what is in that room. You do not want it to be the memory of her that you are left with. Please don't fight me on this."

He had never seen her so pale and wan. Even when she'd been forced to watch his beatings as a child, there had been a flush of anger in her cheeks. Before their travels began, Artemio had taken her aside and told her as little of the task that he had been assigned as was possible, while still conveying to her the dangers involved. She had pried for more, because she was Harmony, and he had tried to keep more from her, because he was her brother and did not want her dreams to be troubled. In the end, her prying had won out more than his caution, of course. Before they had departed Covotana she had known every detail of the murders, something that she was doubtless regretting now, knowing the carnage that had to be hidden behind their parents' bedchamber doors.

As the castellan led her off, taking care not to look back, Artemio steeled himself. In all of his years, this suite of rooms had been forbidden to him, and the prospect of observing the site of his own mother's murder pushed the dread that he felt about stepping through the portal into the unknown from the dull prickle of a childhood rule about to be defied and into genuine anxiety. Not for the first time, he cursed his own mind. Were he a foolish man, he'd have had nothing to fear from the room ahead. He would

have seen the stains or marks and they would have meant nothing. Even as a man of moderate intellect he might have been able to simply observe the evidence.

When he stepped into the room, he saw the murder.

The blankets were still in disarray, dragged out into the room and across the flagstones, father's bare feet could be clearly seen as rusty stains. Artemio clung to the door for a moment, pretending to himself that he was examining it. Noting the key on the inside. The only key to the room. Mother and father had always gone to bed at the same time, so there was no need for another. It had been one of the few tenets of their marriage, that no matter what troubled one or the other, neither one would lay down to rest until the other was beside them. Or at least, it had been their rule for so long as Artemio still lived here.

Creeping closer, taking careful steps to avoid any hint of blood, more and more of the death revealed itself.

The butchery of it.

Mother's body was blessedly gone, and there were clear signs of where parts of it had been dragged. Where the remains had been small enough to be lifted cleanly away without disturbing that which was around it there was still the pool and droplet of blood to mark positions.

There was no more time for reluctance or self-pity. If Artemio meant to catch the killer, then he needed to do the very thing he'd been frantically avoiding since first taking on this quest.

He looked at the gore, and he let his mind work backwards through time. Here was the dug-in press of an exposed rib. Here a clump of hair had left a ghost of itself in rust up the post of the bed. With every part in place, he worked in backwards, following them through their trajectory, through the frenzied violence, the spatter and the horror back until the last moment that his mother lay alive and breathing, still asleep when the Last King's scythe fell.

The death had been explosive.

There were alchemical concoctions that might take a person apart like this, but they would have left residues and stains of their own. Damage to the mattress, the drapes, the walls. There was no way that Father could have emerged unscathed from the indent in his side of the bed if such a thing had been done.

Bisnonno Fiore was ever the easiest for Artemio to call, so he traded away another wrinkle to see through the old echo's eyes. There had been no shade called here. No expression of the power that could be channelled through a practitioner of the art. The old king faded without a second thought.

Two options down, Artemio moved in closer, crouching level with the bed, searching for any signs in the down-stuffed cloth of the mattress for the nature of the force that took his mother apart.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Artemio fought the lightning bolt that shot up his spine telling him to straighten up and feel shame. He was too old and too tired of this routine for father's words to have him running for the nursemaid.

He kept his gaze steady on the topside of the bed and did the math in his head. That gutless bastard castellan must have dropped Harmony at her chamber and then sprinted the length of the Osservatore back to father's office to tell on him.

Swallowing his distaste, Artemio reminded himself that this conversation did not have to be undertaken at a fraction of the pace he was capable of. Nightmare that his Father was, there was no denying he could make rapid-fire connections with the best of them. "I can't imagine that you thought the crown would allow you to conduct your own witch-hunt."

Cleto raised an eyebrow. "You?"

"Who better?" He gestured imperiously to the bloody mess of a room. "Look at all of the lovely motivation I've been given."

Artemio watched his father carefully as the old man spoke. There was no possibility that Cleto would share the details of his own experience or investigation, but the lie that he wheeled out would still offer a clue. Like a knight trying to protect a hidden wound, the position of the shield might give it all away. "Mark my words, boy. Those back-birthed brats on the throne are behind it. It's just an excuse to be rid of you when you fail. A clean way to wash their hands of our bloodline."

"I doubt that even half the Teatro know who the Vulpe are by now. If they strung us up and set us alight in Covotana, the only complaint you'd hear would be about the smell."

"The people remember their true allegiance."

Artemio just let that nonsense hang in the air between them. In his experience, the commoner's allegiance went to whoever kept food in their belly, a roof over their head and whipped them the least. When it came to the noble houses, loyalty was bought for a marginally higher price, but it was still bought. Harmony said that Artemio had no romance in his heart. In truth, Artemio had no romance in his head. He had no room for it there since he was using the massive amount of space it apparently occupied for things like thinking.

Apparently enough of his doubt showed on his face to enrage his father once more. Not that the man needed much enraging. "Get out of here. Run yelping like a cur to your masters if you please, but I'll not tolerate you in this room."

Artemio shrugged. "I was done anyway."

As he passed by the Count, the old man snarled after him. "You never should have come here."

"I go where the crown commands." He paused at the door. "Such is the price of loyalty."

It wasn't a necessary twist of the knife, but he'd be damned if it wasn't the most satisfying thing he'd done in his whole life.