

Rat Rebellion
Chapter 5: The Widow Problem
By Draconicon

Anastus walked through Florus's mansion with his mind torn in a dozen different directions. The naked rat barely noticed that the rest of the rat 'slaves' were in little clusters here and there, could barely hear their muttering to each other. All that he cared about, all that mattered at that moment, was the schism between him and Lidochka.

She'll push for more, he thought, the rat shaking his head as he made his way towards Florus's old quarters. *She was willing to kill once, and she'll be willing to kill again, if she thinks that it's necessary.*

And so had he. Anastus pushed that thought away, reminding himself that he felt guilt for killing someone, that he had been sick from doing it. That had to make it better, right? That had to be...

That had to be the right way to handle it. Not with anger. Not with vengeful rage. They were supposed to be better than the masters that tried to lord over them, but if all they could think of was violence, killing, destruction...

We have to be better. We have to be better.

The unspoken question, of course, was whether it was possible to be better.

The rat shook his head, pulled back to the moment as he found the stairs to Florus's quarters. He put his hand on the railing, climbing them and leaving the noise of the main halls and floor behind. The other rats would take care of things, as he had ordered. He had to deal with something more delicate.

With the death of one of the noble lords, that meant that the wife of the family would, theoretically, be the one that was in control of that man's estate. They were not entirely egalitarian, the overlords, but they were keen to keep it in the family. As far as he remembered from Florus's many rants on the topic, that family had not had the luck of having children just yet, so it fell to the wife.

And that meant, if they were careful, then the death of the husband need never come out. They could preserve the secrecy of their rebellion for that little bit longer.

He left the stairwell, coming to the one room at the top of the tower. One of the other slaves stood there, naked as he was, and the patchy-colored rat bowed his head.

“Anastus.”

“Melor,” he said, nodding in return. “She’s safe?”

“Safe? Yes. Not happy, but safe.”

“Lidochka hasn’t been here?”

“No,” the other rat said, shaking his head, but curiously. “Should she -”

“No, no.”

Best not to spread that too far, or have the others questioning that just yet. He needed time, time to put together an answer to what was going on, time to put together a plan for all the rats to follow. And that? That would take more time than he currently had.

“For now, just keep her from entering if she comes here.”

“Why?”

“Because I need this woman alive, and Lidochka wants her dead.”

“Right...” Melor nodded. “I will...I will try.”

Remonstrations died unsaid. Considering the sheer violence that the female had displayed in the dining room, he wouldn’t be surprised if some of the other rats were afraid of her, too. If she was angry enough to show that against their former masters, what else would she be willing to do to someone that got in her way?

“Just try.”

“I’ll do that, Anastus. I’ll do that.”

They shared another nod, and he walked into the old lord’s chambers.

The vixen woman was still in her dress, and she stood by the window, looking out at the rest of the city. The rat knew from experience that the window was far too high to climb from, even with all the blankets and ropes and more in the room to tie together. He knew, because he’d tried.

The rest of Cornu was hardly worth looking at. The other manors of the fox lords were not seen very well from that window, and he knew that she wouldn't have the ability to send a message from one window to another. Few looked upon Florus's estates, these days. They were considered...eccentric.

He shut the door behind him, and the vixen still didn't turn around. As he leaned back, trying to find the words to start this again, to find something that might keep her from being too angry to listen to reason, the silence stretched on. Her tail twitching was the only sign that she knew he was there; everything else screamed of her intentional unawareness.

Just as he was about to open his mouth, she finally spoke.

"Do you know who I am, rat?"

"...I don't know your name, no."

"My name is Cassia. Cassia, of the Pontius family. My husband was Decim. And you had him killed."

"That was not my choice."

"You allowed it to happen. The killer was your subordinate, and ergo, she was, at the very least, encouraged by you."

"..."

Turning from the window, the vixen fixed him with a flat stare, looking up and down his body slowly. There was none of the desire that had overcome Florus, nor any of the interest and intrigue that had come from the rats. Though her lips were flat, her eyes were alight with the rawest sense of disgust that he'd ever seen.

"And now, you come to me naked. Should I be concerned about being raped, next?"

"That's not why I'm here."

"Then it is my silence you seek."

"That...is part of it. I want to convince you -"

"What? That you and yours have a worthy cause?" She let out a short, clipped bark of a laugh, turning her head from him. "Slaves have no such thing."

His fingers curled against the doorframe, half to keep from saying something stupid, half for the anger that was already bubbling up through him. Lidochka was not right. They could not simply kill her without inviting further questions. Their cause teetered on the edge of a knife. They couldn't push it the wrong way.

But the vixen wasn't done. She looked out the window again as she walked over to it, leaning against the sill.

"Your kind are all the same. Little wonder why you have to be controlled, restrained. One whiff of any sort of privilege, and you want to use it to bring down the rest of the world. No sense as to why the world works the way that it does. No attempt to grasp why, perhaps, someone must suffer so that others may live properly."

"Why not take it in turns, then?" he asked.

"Hmmp. Can you see my species ever tilling the land?" she asked, extending a delicate arm before shaking her head. "No. We are not built for it. We never had the knack. It was obviously meant to be the work of you and yours, not me and mine."

"So, to you, it's fate that rats are kept at the bottom?"

"Fate? Perhaps. If there was a mind behind it, I would call it design, but what chance is there of that, since I am here, and you are there?"

"...My plan is to change things," he said, trying to get them back on track. "What happened to your husband was a mistake. What happened to Florus was unintentional. Everything that has happened has...gone wrong. But that doesn't have to continue. The kingdom...the world can change. It has to change."

"And why?" Cassia turned. "Why does it have to change? Because some rodent believes that he deserves more?"

"Because we *do* deserve more."

"Hmmp. Perhaps you should prove that before claiming such things."

"..."

"You may go."

"You are not in charge here."

"Rat. Your options, such as I see them, are limited. You may either obey me, such as you will, rape me, or kill me." Cassia smiled. "And if you kill me, then you have already lost. Now, be a good little slave and leave your betters be."

Anastus knew that he could change what was happening. He could lunge for her and pin her down. He could teach her where she belonged. He could do the same thing that, doubtlessly, any number of rats in the household were already doing to the other fox families, something that he would need to see to and put a stop to if they'd already started.

There were options, but none of them were acceptable.

“...I will give you time to think, Cassia,” he said.

“That would be Mistress Cassia, slave.”

“...”

Anastus stepped through the door, slamming it behind him with more force than he had entirely meant, but the anger had to go somewhere. Melor was still there, waiting, watching, and Lidochka had joined them. The albino rat looked at him with narrowed eyes, cocking her head to the side.

“So, did persuasion do anything?”

“You aren’t allowed to see her,” he said, pushing past the female and walking down the staircase. She followed.

“She needs to die. They all need to die.”

“Thankfully, most of the others disagree with you.”

“Not all of them.”

“They’ll do what I say.”

“Oh, is that so? Are we going to be bowing and scraping and calling you ‘master’ next?”

He stopped in his tracks, whipping his head around. No matter how furious he was, however, Lidochka met it, the female leaning in until they were almost nose to nose. Their ears flattened, and her teeth clicked as she snapped them together.

“They’ll kill us the second that they know what’s happening. They won’t risk this spreading to the rest of the kingdom. Our lives are nothing to them. Why do their lives have to mean anything to us?”

“Because we aren’t them.”

“They’re on top, Anastus. There’s a reason for that.”

“Do I need to lock *you* up, too?”

“And if I said yes?”

The thought of going that far, of pushing her into a cell, would be enough to start an uprising among the rebellion. The very idea of going that far reeked of merely taking the place of the masters. But what else could he do? She was threatening to make them as bad as the people they were trying to overthrow.

Lidochka shook her head, forcing her way past him. He let her go, not knowing anything he could have said to stop her.

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Two days passed. Aside from ensuring that only rats loyal to him could see the prisoners, very little of worth was accomplished. There were things that might have been done to make the imprisoned foxes see things his way, including dosing them with the same potion - or a better one - that Florus had tried to use on him, but he was reluctant to take it that far just yet. He wanted to win by being better, by convincing them that he was right.

However, though some few saw things a bit clearer than Cassia, or with greater sympathy, the majority of them were convinced that they were in the right. Worse, they were aware that time was on their side, and that his squeamishness was preventing him from doing what needed to be done. If they could wait him out, their families would come for them, or others, nobles outside of Cornu looking in on their fellows.

As for Cassia herself, no headway had been made, despite his attempts to be civil. Even now, sitting across from her at the small table that Florus had for guests, he could tell that she was merely waiting out the lunchtime hour to send him away again, to take her tray like a slave and go back to the kitchens. He sighed, shaking his head.

“You could at least admit that there’s merit to the idea of change,” he said.

She said nothing, merely dabbing her lips with a cloth before continuing with her meal. That had been the way of things since the first time that she had sent him away. There would be a message saying that she was willing to indulge his presence while she had her meal, only for silence to reign no matter what he said. He had yet to find a way to push her out of it, no matter what he said, no matter what he did.

More and more, the idea of using the potions, and...the other things...began to appeal.

Anastus got to his feet, pacing in the nude around the table. His sac shook with unspent seed, yet another reminder of his options of how to deal with the vixen across from him. Cassia merely watched with lidded eyes, not bothering to stop sipping her tea or dining on soup from the kitchens.

“Why are you making me do this?” he asked.

She didn’t answer, merely raising an eyebrow. Nevertheless, it was the most engagement that he had gotten in two days, and he seized on it.

“I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want to kill you. And I do *not* want to rape you. Why...Why are you doing this?”

The vixen took her napkin, dabbing her lips once more.

“Do you think that my principles are any less dear to me than yours?”

“They’re wrong. Your principles encourage slavery. Torture. Everything that I’m not doing to you.”

“To slaves,” she said. “Not to me and mine. And you ask me to bend them, to accept that you and yours are...people,” she added with a wave of disbelief. “The very notion is absurd.”

“But we are!”

He turned around, pointing at his back.

“You know the scars. You’ve seen them. We bleed. We scream. We cry. We...” He turned again, half-mad with frustration. “What will it take to make you see us the way that we see ourselves?”

“There is nothing in this world that could convince me that a rat is equal to me.”

“...”

“Your options, rat, have not changed since you first locked me in here,” Cassia said, picking up her cup again. “You may rape me, kill me, or obey me. I will not sacrifice my principles or my belief. If you wish for things to change, then it is up to you to do that.”

The vixen had to be insane. She had to be. There was no way that she would see everything that was going on and still believe that any of this was right. Her life was at stake, her freedom, everything, and she still...

Anastus stared at her, his breath coming harsh and hard. The vixen pushed her teacup back onto the tray, drained the last of her soup from her bowl, and put it down.

“You may go.”

“...You...”

“Slave. You may go.”

He wanted to take the tray and bash her over the head with it. Every horrible thought that he could have had, he did, from bending her over the table and teaching her her place to stabbing the spoon through her throat, and more besides. Every slave carried fantasies of revenge in their

minds, though they were seldom dragged from the vault in which they hid. At that moment, an entire lifetime's worth of fantasies of revenge, of the need for vengeance and how to get it, passed through his mind.

His hands shook as he picked up the tray, barely maintaining his grip on his decision to take it slowly. Anastus forced the tremors away, opening the door slowly.

“You will die, rat.”

Slowly he turned, looking back at Cassia. She looked at him with narrowed eyes, her fingers tapping on the table.

“You will die. Slowly, painfully, and with great regret for all that you've done. The order of all things will be maintained, and you will be the example that puts the rest of your people in place.”

“...”

“Now, go.”

It took everything he had not to rip the door off the handles. The desire to be better was slowly fading.

#

Another two days passed. Slight progress was made with the other families. The decision to use the potion, combined with a little...attention...was made. Most of the families were making some hint of progress, though it was slow going with the desire to try and allow them to keep a portion of their minds.

He had not seen Lidochka since the confrontation in the stairwell, and he did not know what to make of that. She had made her point, yes, but what if she had other plans? What if she was undermining him with the other rats? She had made it quite clear that she believed he was wrong, and that there were rats among the household that didn't believe the same as him. What if she was arranging her own internal uprising?

The stress left him with little chance to relax, and less sleep, and as such, it was a very strained rat that made his way up the stairs to Cassia's quarters. Melor was asleep against the doorframe when he arrived, breathing fine, but sleeping. Anastus shook his head, opening the door.

As soon as he stepped through, he knew something had gone wrong.

There was no vixen to be seen. He pulled the door shut behind him, looking at the window. No immediate sign of a rope or anything else that might have led to someone climbing

out. Nothing that implied that the noblewoman had tried jumping to her death. He walked to the window and leaned over -

“AGH!”

Only for something to stab straight through his tail. It was pinned to the floor, and he was pinned in place. From beneath the bed, Cassia rose, holding another wooden spike in hand. A glance at the bedframe told him what had happened; she'd broken two shards from the legs near the wall, and had saved them for this moment.

Gritting his teeth as his tail bled, he stumbled around his impaled tail. She stood between him and the door, holding the other wooden shard - scraped to be sharp as could be - tightly, the point aimed at him.

“So...is this...another part of your principles?” he asked. “Kill someone that disagrees with you?”

“It's quite consonant with them. Ensure that a slave that believes himself otherwise pays the price for his rebellion. A person cannot be imprisoned by a non-person.”

He groaned. Four days. Four days of trying to persuade her, and it turned out that she was as crazy as could be. Whether she'd always been this way or if it had just been the last four days messing with her head, he didn't know, but whatever it was, she had completely slid from sanity. And he was at a serious disadvantage.

“It would be simplicity to end you, rat,” she said, pointing at him. “You are pinned.”

“And stronger than you,” he added.

“It wouldn't matter.”

“...You aren't serious.”

“I told you before, rat. Obey me, rape me, or kill me. You have given up on obedience, so now, I make my choice.”

And without another word, she charged straight at him.

The world seemed to slow before his eyes as she came for him. His pinned tail restricted how far he could move, and he couldn't actually move away from the window. Small as Cassia was, she was still enough to knock him back. To stop her, he'd need to hurt her, and...

He couldn't.

She slammed into him, and back he went. They fell over the lip of the window, his tail splitting in two from the stabbed point. He screamed as they went sailing back, flying through the air, blood trailing after them.

The stake. The stake. She grabbed him by the chest fur, and he looked up to see it coming. Slow, still, so slow, just as he was. If the fall did not kill him, then the stake would. And if he died...

If he died...

Blood would flow, and it would not stop. Lidochka would bring every rat in the manor against the foxes of Cornu. Every other species would become a target for this. They would rise up, they would cut and bleed and kill. There would be no mercy. There would be nothing but rage.

The rest of the kingdom would descend, and Cornu would be put to the sword. His people would die. All of them would die. And the rats through the land would never, ever have a chance to break free again.

Not yet... He reached up and grabbed her wrist as it came down, even as they fell. *I can't die yet.*

In desperation, he squeezed down. Her wrist shattered beneath his strength, and some vengeful part of him took pleasure in that. She screamed, and screamed more as he pulled her against his chest, holding her against him. They fell, fell from the heights...to the ground.

The thud that followed tested every enhancement that he had gained through Florus's potion. He felt his bones straining, his back on the verge of snapping. His spine, his skull, everything *hurt*. He barely felt his toes, and his tail refused to move.

But he was alive.

Several of the rats came running, screaming, shouting to ask if he was alright. He could not find the air to answer; he was too focused on keeping Cassia from breaking free.

For she had lived, too.

The other rats seized the vixen, pulling her off of him and shoving her to her knees. As she was gagged, others moved to help him up. Anastus couldn't stand without support, his legs hurting too much, but he knew what broken bones felt like. He knew what the difference between pain and debilitation was. He would recover, slowly, but he would.

Glancing back at the top of the tower, he measured the fall. Sixty feet, at least, perhaps more. His body was strong, stronger than he imagined Florus had ever wanted it to be. If he could survive that, then there was the chance of the other rats surviving, too. It was something to be remembered, if war ever came.

“What do you want to do with her, Anastus?” one of them asked.

He looked the vixen in the eye. She burned with hatred, with rage. She had expected to kill him and die, or at the very least, die herself. She was insane, or her beliefs were, but it amounted to the same thing.

“You can’t change everyone,” he muttered to himself.

“Anastus?”

“Take her to the potion chamber. She’ll be...she’ll be given the potion, the same as the others.”

“...” The vixen’s eyes went wide, and he realized what he had just done. In her eyes, he had taken her ‘personhood’ from her. In one swift stroke, he had taken what had made her superior.

As he looked up, he saw Lidochka coming across the grounds, as well. She fixed him with a stare, then glanced questioningly at the vixen. He sighed.

“And when she’s dosed...chain her. We’ll change her tonight.”

The End