

Waltz of Teeth
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112

The room had been ransacked. Every cupboard pried open. Splayed sooty footprints spilling out from the fireplace where someone had been digging up the flue. The rat-girl didn't even have the courtesy to look embarrassed about what she'd done. "You weren't here."

"The investigation is not always going to place me here at your convenience." Artemio pretended that he did not see that she had torn the room apart looking for her damned pet. "You know how to write. Leave a note."

Her eyes darted to the overturned heaps of papers that spread across the floor. "Write? How many hours do you think I have in a day?"

"Enough to spy for anyone with a coin purse that jingles." He caught himself before it became a snarl. Anger wouldn't undo what had been done. It wouldn't make her more pliable. She was desperate. He understood desperation all too keenly. He sank back into the chair. "Just... report to me now."

The sloped shoulders tensed up. "Where is she?"

Insolence was not something most of the nobility of Espher would have tolerated. Just imagining what his father would do to a servant that spoke to him in the manner that this mongrel spoke to him was enough to break a cold sweat on Artemio's forehead. "The rodent travelled with me and ate well on table scraps. I think she may even have gained weight. Now report."

The tension eased a little, but the rat-girl was still looking entirely too stubborn for Artemio's liking when she said. "There's nothing."

"Two weeks I was on the road, and you have nothing to tell me?" He scoffed and turned his attention back to the notes that he was attempting to put back in order. "You aren't worth what they pay for you."

She let out a squeak of dismay. "There's all the usual sh... stuff. The Spring Waltz is coming up so rumours are thick as... stuff. Marriage proposals. Broken promises. Lady Cavalla's eldest is pregnant out of wedlock. Nothing to do with this though. Just... nothing."

He let their eyes meet as he rose from his seat and wrapped his cloak around his shoulders. Letting the weight of the situation settle on her just as heavily as that mantle of thick cloth around him before he spoke. "I'm beginning to question your worth."

"You want miracles." She looked genuinely aggrieved. "I'm just a maid."

He waved at the chaos she'd made of this study on his way out. "Then clean this mess up. Maid."

The palace had been his first stop on arrival in town. Needless to say Harmony was less than delighted to be sent along to the House of Seven Shadows with his luggage, yet there was a limit on how much she could object when he more or less leapt from their moving carriage.

He fully expected to receive an earful from her on his return to the school, but after so long away from his studies, he knew that there was no possibility of delaying it any further. Not if he didn't want the outpouring of sympathy from Prima Cicogna and the other staff to abruptly dry up. A death in the family could only be milked for so long. Two weeks was probably close to that limit.

Nothing of the journey back to the House stuck in his memory until he was walking the halls once more and double guessing his journey. Wondering if he'd been seen. Wondering if he'd been clumsy and painted a target on his own back.

There were two stops to make. One to his own chambers to ensure his property had been returned, and so that he could be chewed out by Harmony, then the next to the Prima's offices so that he could be chewed out by her for abandoning his studies at a vital juncture. There was no point attempting to avoid either, but at least the promise of the Prima's denigration gave him an excuse to cut his darling sister's complaints short.

By the entrance to his room, there was a small table. Above it hung his cloaks, his sword belt, and Harmony's blindfold. On the table, a servant would deliver any mail that the resident had received. In all of his time here, nobody had ever sent him anything.

Those that supported his family's claim to the throne would never be so foolish as to openly send him a letter, and those who did not support his family's claim considered him to be a pariah. Nobody sent him mail except for Mother.

The envelope sitting open on the table was surprising. Harmony sitting beside the table and reading his mail was anything but surprising. "I believe that was addressed to me."

She waved it at him. "It's an invitation."

Artemio hung up his cloak and went to check his chest had been delivered to the right room. Calling back over his shoulder as he went. "Oh charming, has some fresh nest of serpents been uncovered that they need a fool to jam his head into?"

"It is an invitation to a ball."

He stuck his head back into the room. "I beg your pardon?"

"You don't even know how to dance." There was a hysterical edge to her laughter.

"I can fumble my way through a waltz." He came back into the room properly as his confusion built. "Did you say I've been invited to a ball? Who would invite me to a ball?!"

"Someone who knows that you're in the Cervas' favour."

He tried to snatch the invitation from her hands with no luck. She was quicker and the same length of limb that gave her the advantage in a fight kept it from him. "The invitation is from Lady Anatra. They host the Spring Ball every year. How do you not know this?"

"It never seemed relevant."

"The first social event of the season after everyone holed up at their country estates over the winter and you don't think it is relevant. I swear you are intent on the family name dying out."

“Oh come on now, it isn’t like I ever expected to... dance.”

“Well you will be attending I hope. If you don’t I might have to murder you.”

“If I attend then everyone will know that I have the kings favour. They’ll question why. When my investigation becomes public knowledge...”

“That horse is out of the stable and galloping for the horizon, Art. They know. It is known. You wouldn’t be invited otherwise.”

“You know. I know.” He mentally tallied rat-girl but didn’t mention her. “Father knows. But this letter was here waiting for us, so Father couldn’t have told anyone. News wouldn’t have travelled that fast.”

“Keep going,” Harmony tapped her foot beneath the table. “You’ll get there in a minute.”

“If a servant was on the payroll of the Anatra’s then...”

Harmony let out a little hiss. “A miss on that thrust. Try again.”

Artemio’s brows furrowed, until enlightenment came like a soap bubble bursting. “The Cerva. The Kings.”

“Finally.” She threw back her head and groaned. “I thought you were meant to be the clever one.”

He was pacing back and forth now, brain bubbling back into action, the way that had always annoyed Harmony. “There’s no point in having a lightning rod if you don’t hoist it up.”

Harmony knew her role as a sounding board well. She bounced back the questions that she thought she ought to. “You think that they want the assassins to come after you?”

“I think that they think I’ll be able to fend them off. None of the victims have been Shadebound. Whatever means is being deployed against them, they have not shown any signs of an attempted defence.” Even as he said it, his mind continued spinning through the possibilities. “The kings must think it is magic. They must think I can withstand it.”

The smile had slipped from her face sometime in the midst of all this pondering. “Or they think it will kill you and get a threat to their throne out of their hair.”

He gave her a rueful smile. “It is win-win.”

“Not for you.”

“No.” He said softly. “Not for me.”

She shook herself out of it. “So, do you think I could get an invite too?”

“I think that if I show up to the social event of the season with my sister as my date, I would deserve to be a social pariah.” He grinned back, glad for the change of subject.

The ball was not for a few days, and as usual, Artemio had grossly underestimated his sister’s tenacity. While he was trying to catch up on his missed lessons, she was there, demanding to escort him, for his safety. His enemies could be around any corner, why shouldn’t she be there?

Her insistent demands switch to pleading by the next day, a recitation of her endless suffering. As if he did not know every part of it like it were his own. As if he had not been her sole confidante through every single one of her many lonely years.

By day three, his betrayal was unforgivable, he should be ashamed of himself and she had nothing more to say to him. Yet somehow she kept finding her way into his presence to repeat that she had nothing to say to him until finally, inevitably he gave in. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. "Your invitation is conditional. It is essential that you understand that."

She let out a sound akin to the steam whistle on a kettle, then began to babble. "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. You're the best brother I could ever ask for and I am ever so very grateful..."

"This is not an excuse for you to indulge your filthy socialization habits. We will be working."

"Of course, oh general my general, I shall march to the beat of your drum. And I shall wear the green dress that mother bought me for my first season in the city, the one that I never got the chance to wear. It will be out of fashion of course, but I'd rather save my stipend for more pressing matters. Perhaps I might get some seed beads sewn on while the work is being done on it. I shall have to get the chest let out a little, and the hips."

"Harmony, I beg you, focus. We are going into enemy territory. There will be no telling what might happen."

"Perhaps someone will be so taken with my beauty that they'll overlook our blighted name and ask me to dance."

"Harm."

"I shan't be accepting any proposals of course, our arrangement would make that impossible, but it would be so nice to dance just the once."

"Harmony!"

"Yes, brother dearest, light of my life?"

"I need you to teach me how to dance."

"You don't know how to... no of course you don't. Not manly enough, right?"

"Indeed."

"Well, no time like the present. Up you get."

So for the last two days as some poor seamstress that Harmony had already acquired the details of worked frantically to get her dress ready, the two of them waltzed. Between writing papers, examining reports from the previous murders, discussing potential suspects lurking in Artemio's own extensive notes, and attending lectures, Artemio learned how to perform a clumsy dance. It lacked all the grace that he and Harmony shared in the gymnasium, but it would have to be sufficient in the unlikely event that anyone requested her join them on the ballroom floor.

There was no budget for the kind of fashion that the rest of the court would be displaying, and there certainly wasn't going to be a bursary offered up by Father for this sort of thing, so they made do, piecing together something that could at least pass for presentable, if a little formal and old fashioned, for Artemio to wear. It fit with his family's reputation as the old power for him to be a little behind the times, or at least that was how Harmony spun it.

Artemio was even able to convince himself that they looked quite striking as they strolled down through the gardens alongside the other luminaries of more favoured houses to clamber up into the coaches that his hosts provided. There were enough of his fellow scions that he managed to pass invisibly until they were actually inside a coach, then the dream came crashing down all too quickly when some girl looked across at him with patent disgust on her face and asked. "Are you in the right carriage?"

He didn't flinch. "I am. Perhaps you're the one who has lost their way?"

That promptly annihilated any chance at overhearing rumours on the way to the party, so Artemio had to hope that once the guests were more lubricated, he might find some quiet corner to lurk in where everything could be overheard. It wasn't as though he hoped to hear open talk of sedition on the dancefloor. Just hints. All he needed was a thread that he might pull on. No matter how tenuous a connection any event or muttered rumour might have, he would chase it down to the ends of the earth. But first he needed that thread.

If an evening of awkward company was all that it took to get his investigation moving once more, then he'd tolerate it, just as he had all the years of social isolation that went before. He had tried to grant the other riders in the carriage some degree of comfort by looking out of the window, but they had failed to return the favour. Harmony was blushing to the roots of her hair at so much unwanted attention. Looking askance to him, to make it all better. So he turned his scrutiny upon the other passengers with no small amount of malice. If he and his sister were going to be made to feel like some side-show spectacle, the least that he could do was return the favour.

The girl who'd spoken up was the first to receive his attentions. Brown hair. Beauty spot high on the cheek. "Vivace Ragna? Your father fought the Agrantine at the Battle of Cestino. He acquitted himself admirably until the counter-charge."

He pointedly did not mention that the man broke and ran when the Agrantine Heavy Cavalry made their assault, collapsing the whole Espher battle-line and costing them the day, and the valley. He didn't need to tell her that. She knew, and now she knew that he knew and had the words on the very tip of his tongue. Harmony did not know her military history, she had no idea what Artemio was saying, yet her blush had begun to recede. She might not have understood how he had deflated the Ragna girl, but there was a sparkle in her eye now that she realised that they were not entirely defenceless.

The boy sitting beside Vivace was unfamiliar. More brown hair. Blue eyes were unusual for Espher outside of the old royal line, but Artemio still couldn't place him. Some minor son of a greater house? Artemio waited. Looking at him. Letting silence fill the carriage until the weight of it grew unbearable. The man extended a hand, "Allegro Anguilla."

Artemio shook the offered hand gratefully. Some degree of politeness wasn't too much to ask for it seemed. He even granted the boy a genuine smile in thanks for that kindness. "I can't believe that we aren't already acquainted. Do you study at the House?"

“Newly arrived from the country. I’m afraid I didn’t catch your name.”

“Terrible manners. My mother must be turning in her grave.” That little mention was enough to make the man seated on the same bench beside Harmony, with his back turned to the two of them, flinch. Every word was calculated. “I am Artemio Volpe.”

The colour drained from Allegro’s face as he hastily withdrew his hand. “Volpe?”

“Exactly.” Artemio smiled, turning to the last passenger. “And of course, I’m sure you already know Demetrio Cavalla, or at the very least you must know his sister.”

Another flinch, but puzzled expressions from the rest of the carriage. Perhaps rat-girl had some purpose after all, even if it was just to provide him with the ammunition to needle those who looked down on him. “And of course this is my sister, Harmony. I do hope that you get the chance to know one another better. Although not as well as you know Demetrio’s of course.”

Allegro was still fumbling, trying to get his words together, it was almost terminally ill-spoken when he blurted out, “I wasn’t aware that you were going to be invited.”

It wasn’t a question, but the question that was on all of their lips was clearly burning bright just under the surface of that fumbled statement. Why had they invited the Volpe twins? That boded well. It meant that his work for the twin kings had not yet become public knowledge, and those who were in the know meant to court his favour quietly. It was advantageous in respect to the assassins, and a terrible impediment otherwise.

Those courting him wanted him isolated so that nobody else could attempt to win him over before knowledge of his activities became public, but that then left him to fabricate a reason that he was suddenly invited to social events after his long years in the desert. He elected simply to keep his mouth shut and look back out of the window after saying, “Yes, it was a pleasant surprise for us all.”

The awkward silence might have come back after that, but now it belonged to Artemio. He could puncture it whenever he pleased. He could spin them whatever tale he wanted or persist in his stubborn silence as it burned each and every one of his fellow noble scions that they were not going to be the most interesting person in the room at the party. As they turned a corner, Harmony’s shoulder bumped against him just a little harder than momentum would have necessitated. A glance showed a smile spreading across her face as she basked in the discomfort of her peers.

Artemio was not his father. He did not have to be in control of every situation that he was in, but in times of discomfort, he could not deny that there was some part of him that wanted that control, that needed it to feel safe. To keep Harmony safe.

On arrival, the other passengers departed from the carriage with all the haste and grace of a burst dam, scattering off to find their friends, dancing partners and confidantes and spread word of his presence. Perhaps the idea of finding a quiet corner and listening along to the chatter had just been a pleasant dream all along. Only Artemio had manners enough to offer Harmony a hand down the steps.

The Anatra compound within the city was palatial. Giving even the House itself a run for its money in terms of architecture and scale. A sprawling villa across a mixture of larger two-story buildings where the family and guests stayed and a variety of outbuildings to house servants, animals and whatever else

a noble house required. At present a solid half of those out-buildings seemed to have been converted from their typical purposes into themed bars and kitchens, providing guests with more than they could feasibly eat in a dozen evenings such as this. Every luxury taken to its greatest excess.

The grand courtyard between the buildings was already populated with arriving guests, the carriages sent out to fetch them in waves, with the least important arriving first, so that the more important could be seen arriving by a greater audience. Between the people towered great white marble statues. Beneath their feet, grand mosaics had been laid out across the space, interspersed with channels of water flowing from one fountain to the next that incautious guests might tread in after sampling the wines brought down into the city from the Anatra's famed vineyards.

Perhaps Artemio's opinions on all of this may have been different if he had grown up among these people. Perhaps he would have considered the evening to be a source of excitement rather than dread. He doubted it. There was a degree of artifice in everything that happened here, from the meeting of glances to the clinking of glasses that made him feel ill-at-ease. As though he had not been taught the steps to the dance.

As they strolled down towards the house from where the carriages had abandoned them, creeping ever closer to the growing orchestral groan of music muffled by thick walls, he let his gaze travel not to the far higher walls surrounding the compound, or the artistic displays of gardening that were meant to enrapture guests, but to the people.

The guards almost perfectly concealed by pillars and shrubberies, the servants, pristinely human, and practically vibrating with their desire to be perfect, so much importance poured into this one event all so that the rich and wealthy could stand around and talk. As though standing and talking were not freely available on any street in the city. As though the words being spoken here, had so much more bearing on the world beyond those high walls than any other traders haggling.

Harmony seemed entirely lost to the romance of it all, overlooking all of the reality in favour of her dream. She drank in every sight with a desperation that made Artemio heartsick to watch. All of her life she had longed for this, and now she could only have it as a farce so that he could scuttle around gathering information. If nobody else offered, then he would have to dance with her at least once tonight. To let her close her eyes and pretend that he was someone else and that she was living the life that she craved.

The life that he had taken from her by his very existence. Certainly, she would not have attended the grand balls of Covotana had he not been Shadebound, but out in the country she could have lived a quiet life, been wed to a man that cared for her more than the stigma of her lineage. She might have found some joy, or at least some peace. Instead she had made herself a weapon to rust by his side. Well, not tonight.

Artemio stopped and pushed her forward. "Walk down alone. It seems that I cannot escape attention, but you might. Secrete yourself somewhere inside, entice some gentlemen to dance with you. Listen more than you talk. Have a pleasant evening, and I shall pick over it all with you on the ride back to the House."

"And who shall keep you out of trouble?" She gawked back at him, clearly torn between the party and her presumptive duty.

He looked her up and down with an eyebrow cocked. "My apologies, I did not realise that you had a sword hidden somewhere in that dress of yours."

Her brows drew down. He shouldn't have poked fun like that if he wanted her to do as he asked. "I..."

"Shall be of much more use to me as a spy if you have not been tarred with the same brush as I." He cut her off with a hand held an inch from her mouth so that he did not smudge her makeup. "Now off you go. Have yourself an evening. Come and find me before midnight. Do not do anything untoward."

"Me?" She shivered, though the night held no chill, and when she met his gaze there was wickedness shining out. "Never."

With that pronouncement of his impending doom, she strode off down the path, catching up to some stragglers from one of the other carriages and inserting herself into their conversation with a grace that he was overwhelmingly envious of. So long as she kept her name to herself, this might be something like a pleasant evening for her. A smile played over Artemio's lips for just a moment. He could not enjoy himself, but he might take some vicarious joy in proceedings through her.

Artemio almost called a shade when he felt an arm interlink with his, and he had to swallow down a yelp before he turned to realise who had latched onto him. "Artemio Volpe, finally coming down from his ivory tower to walk among us mere mortals."

Rosina Aquila. They had shared some classes together before her graduation the previous year, but few words. It had not even crossed his mind that she would be here. Stiffly, he made his greeting, "Rosina, what an honour to walk in with you on my arm."

"Oh don't worry so, I shan't be trying to ravish you in the bushes. I simply cannot imagine anything worse than having to walk in alone."

She had slipped her hand through his arm and fallen into pace with him so neatly that he could scarcely believe it. So familiar for someone who wouldn't look him in the eye months back. Was her family in the know about the king's favour? Was she simply an opportunist? He remembered to speak just a step too late. "I've no doubt that walking in with me probably comes close."

She laughed as if he'd just told her something hilarious. He definitely hadn't. "All eyes will be on us, I can scarce imagine anything better."

"No eyes on me." He grumbled. "No eyes would be better."

Once again her crystal laugh echoed down to the plaza. Heads began to turn. Even Harmony was giving them a quizzical look, ready to run back to her brother's aid. All as Rosina intended.

He rested his hand on hers where it was pressing into his arm. Very forward. How people would talk.

"How have you been, Rosina?"

"Oh, you know." She was trying hard not to crane her head around, her eyes were flitting about like she was one of the moths beginning to gather around the lantern posts. "Neither good nor bad."

"Are you looking for someone in particular?"

She laughed again, but it had a forced edge to it this time. Clumsier than he'd expected of her. "All this excitement, it turns a girl's head. You know."

"I don't." He tightened his grip on her hand. "I don't know."

She smiled at him again as if his non-sequiturs were charming. They were close enough now that Artemio could hear the chatter dying out in a wave as they approached. Where he walked, conversation died. As it always had been. The only difference was that now he was somewhere busy enough that it was noticeable.

The crowd parted around them as Artemio made a bee-line for the main house, ignoring all the little diversions that had been set up to amuse and entice the guests. He wasn't running for cover, but there was no denying that his pace was somewhat swift compared to Rosina's preferred stroll. She almost stumbled keeping up with him. "Are you in a hurry to be somewhere?"

"Not at all, but I imagine that you want your grand entrance, don't you?" She struggled to keep her eyes on his face for even the long moment she was faking puzzlement. "That was the purpose of this whole exercise. Was it not?"

"My goodness, you would think that you didn't want to be seen in my company the way that you are behaving." Again, the edge of false joviality to everything that she said and did. Smiles that didn't reach her eyes.

"I'd prefer not to be seen at all." Why lie when the truth was so much harder to disprove? "I've no idea why I received an invitation to this evening's festivities, and I'd prefer if the good manners that brought me here didn't cause anyone else any discomfort, as we seem to be doing at the moment."

"Oh pay them no mind." She leaned in scandalously close. So close that the hard boning under the front of her dress dug into his chest. "They're just jealous."

If he was meant to succumb to her feminine wiles, she was going to have to do something considerably more impressive. He flatly replied. "Jealous."

"Of the special attention you've been receiving."

For a half a moment he thought she meant the attention he was receiving from her, then he realised the significance. "I didn't realise that the... special attention was so widely known."

"Those of us with connections at the palace know." The scandalous lean was meant for whispering in his ear, apparently. "Those of us who should know who is coming and going in the presence of his Majesty."

If that was true, it actually presented an excellent opportunity. If only those with close connections to the palace knew that he was heading up the investigation then any assassination attempts would indicate that one of the high families of Espher was responsible. All he had to do was get through the evening without making a scene and the whole thing might be turned to his advantage.

"Thank you for... clarifying our situation. Shall we head in?"

She smiled. "By all means."

Within the widespread doors of the villa golden light glimmered. The music rose as they covered the last few feet. Rosina was something of a comfort at his side. The warmth of her tethering him to reality as he looked in on a world that he never thought that he'd experience. Warm, right up until the moment that she channelled a shade and became deathly chill to the touch.

Time seemed to slow as he turned to glance at her. The air around her thickened and rippled as she wove a protective cushion around herself. He clamped his teeth together like he'd been trained just before the impact knocked him from his feet.

The golden glow. The sky. The mosaic. The golden glow. The sky. The mosaic.

Artemio tumbled end over end before finally rolling back to his feet. His cloak tattered beyond saving. His head, tucked down into his chest by the initial blow, thankfully cushioned from harm.

Even so he came up dizzy with his two shades whipping around him in a tempest, just begging to be let in. To protect him.

He silenced them with a jerk of his hand. They came when he called. Not when his heart beat too fast.

To buy time to think, he let his mouth run. "That was rude."

A man came bustling out, about five years Artemio's senior. A student of the house that he'd never crossed paths with thanks to that gap in age. Finely dressed, but finely dressed in clothing loose enough that would allow him to dance around laterally as well as in a waltz. Fine clothes to fight in. When he shouted, it was for the plaza to hear, not Artemio. "How dare you lay hand on my fiancé?"

There it was. The reason Rosina had latched on. The excuse to attack him that even he could not deny. All before he'd even stepped into the home of the Anatra family and received their hospitality and protection. It had been slickly executed, well-conceived, and it had already failed.

Artemio didn't even trouble himself to look at his assailant, not when he could already make out Harmony elbowing her way through the crowd. She was going to involve herself, and the delicate social mores that were crystallized around them would shatter and people would die. Harmony most likely among them. He could not let this happen.

A second shadow flitted out from him and Bisnonno Fiore leapt from the solid ground of his being to catch Harmony by the hair. Hissing in her ear, "Stop."

She had never known the old king, but the voice still carried as much command now as it had in life. There were few who still held the old king in regard, but those that did, held him with a feverish passion. Worshiping his memory like he were a deity and pouring all their expectations of the man into the shade. They believed that a true king could stop a man with a word, and so Fiore could. Harmony froze in place.

It cost Artemio the time he needed to strike back at his foe. His own shadows betrayed the shade he'd called, giving false warning to the buffoonish would-be killer that Artemio meant to do him harm.

When the next lash of wind struck out, Artemio deflected it with a flash of fire that chased back along the funnel towards the shade that called it. The fiancé's finely tailored sleeves caught alight before he

could loosen his grip on whatever weather shade he'd managed to master. The crowd was not thinning despite the danger. Dinner and a show at the Anatra Spring Ball.

By the time he'd beaten the flames out, Artemio had his next move prepared. "Excuse me sir, I do not know you. Is this meant to be a challenge?"

Both a goad and a question in one. It had the desired effect. "I walk out to find you caressing my future wife and you think that I will let it stand!?"

A dart of air, invisible to the naked eye. Sharp as a razor. Caught in another flare of flame belched out from the forge spirit Artemio had tamed beneath the broken tower on the Cut. It loved to burn more than anything else. "A duel then?"

"To the death."

Artemio grinned. He had him. "Then might I ask what you mean by calling shades against me? If I am the challenged party, do I not have the choice of weapon?"

The crowd inside had pressed up to the doorway now, nudging Harmony aside, and forcing Artemio's challenger out into the evening air. He was a truly unimpressive looking character. Weak of chin, but hiding it with a whiskery little beard.

With surprise on his side, he might have taken Artemio in the initial rush, but their plan had been too reliant on making announcements to assure the gathered nobles that the murder was justified.

Now he was flustered and red faced, fumbling at his belt for a rapier. "You'd rather I slit you open then? I have no trouble with slaughtering a cur whichever way it must be done."

This fool wanted it to be theatrical, and who was Artemio to deny a man his dying wish. "If it is my choice, then I choose teeth."

There was a ripple of laughter that the fiancé took to be mocking him. He flushed red once more. "I say, choose a weapon or I shall..."

"Teeth. I did not stutter or slur my words. I choose teeth. If you want my blood, then you must taste it." He unfastened his cloak and cast it to the ground. "Come on then, if you have the courage of your convictions. Come and take a bite of me."

Artemio's words had silenced any laughter or muttering now. The fiancé took a step towards him and Artemio opened his mouth. Not to speak, but to show he was willing. The man standing against him dithered on the spot. It was one thing to cut a man down or set your shades on him, but actually fighting, like an animal. It was beneath a man of good breeding. Obviously. Artemio could almost see these arguments fluttering around in the fool's head, but never getting voiced. His mouth flapped. His fists clenched, and to the absolute delight of the crowd; he stomped his foot and spun on his heel. Trailing off as he pushed his way back into the house. "If you aren't going to take this seriously..."

The circus act was completed to everyone's satisfaction. They all had their story to tell when they got home, or to anyone who was out of favour and missed an invite to the big event. Although judging by the heaving bodies within the villa, there couldn't be many of those.

Artemio bent to retrieve his ruined cloak, thought better of it, and then turned the motion into a stilted bow to where Rosina still stood, stunned and silent. She hustled off after her future husband with all haste, assuming she could still face marrying the coward after such a pathetic display.

For a moment, Artemio waited. Waited to see who would break ranks, amble over and offer him something in the way of congratulations. Who would be the first to publicly out themselves as a friend to him, and by unfortunate extension, his family? As it turned out, nobody.

He stood there until the crowd grew bored and moved back inside, the flow of bodies around him continued. It was as though there had been no attempted murder mere moments before. Polite society at its finest.

Finally when everyone had shuffled away from the scene, only Harmony was left. His only companion as she always had been. She mouthed something to him, but with his blood still thumping he didn't have the concentration to decipher it. He waved her away with a smile.

Still she lingered, risking with every moment yet more attention being drawn to her. He'd given her the perfect opportunity to slip inside unseen and unconnected to him thanks to all of these amateur dramatics, and she was squandering it.

By the same token, he could not go with his instinct and beat an immediate retreat to lick his wounds and ponder over the significance of the botched assault on his person. He could not abandon Harmony here in this den of jackals. No matter how much faith he might have had in her abilities. Not when there were some who'd risk so open a move against him, just for existing.

He drew in a deep breath and considered his options. With an even more painfully forced smile, he waved her off again. She went, glancing back at him all the way and bumping right into someone else. She slipped into a conversation from the apology, then headed off with her new friends into the house proper. This was the world that she was meant for.

The kings had not realised it when they gave him his task, but the situation really was a win for him however it panned out. If he succeeded and survived, he became the lord he was always meant to be and society was forced to accept him, and Harmony as part and parcel, but if he failed and died, she would be free. She'd be free of her obligation to him, free to be the person that she deserved to be instead of lingering in the periphery of his existence.

At one of the out-buildings he took an opened but untouched bottle of wine from out of a servant's gloved hand before they could pour it wastefully into a glass for some sycophant. He took a glance at the label before knocking back a mouthful. A 107 red, heavy and full bodied. Perfect to get angrily drunk with.

If he made it into the house itself then his safety would be assured by the Anatra Family, and the laws of hospitality, yet for some reason he could not bring himself to walk through those doors. Part of it was the hope that Harmony might still fulfil her part in the quest if he were not there to interfere, but a part of it, he had to admit, was stubbornness. If he went inside after that, then it would be an admission that he needed that blanket protection afforded to all. Perhaps he did, but announcing it rankled him.

The true assassins had no issue with disrupting the polite rules of society, so it was not as though his life was any safer if he accepted the Anatra's protection for this one night. Not if the secret of his visit with

the king's was not out. He would be guarding his back against the waiting knives of everyone with a grudge against his father.

Since the very beginning of this entire mess, Artemio had a plan in his back pocket that he had hoped that he would never have to resort to. Outing himself as the investigator, claiming that he was close to a resolution, and then waiting for the inevitable attack to come so that he might interrogate his would-be-killer. While the methodology of the murders had not yet been established, Artemio still clung to his confidence that his talent with shades would allow him to sidestep the consequences.

The targets were being carefully chosen, and selected to avoid those who could channel shades, so it stood to reason that the assassins' choices were being informed by some protection that the shadebound held against their machinations.

Yet what he had never considered was the situation that he was in now, when someone who may be entirely ignorant to his current assignment from the Throne came for him with lethal intent. Rosina knew the king had entertained him, she would have told her fiancé, yet so open a move as this assault could not be the work of the assassins to date. It was too clumsy. They would not have lasted this long with such foolishness. It had to be the work of some other party so fearful of the return of the Volpe family to a position of influence that it was worth feigning ignorance over the king's returning favour, and some small part of their ire at losing them another agent. There would be no shortage of those. Father had seen to that.

Filtering out all of the others who wished him ill before such time as his investigations became public knowledge would be a challenge in itself. Not everyone would be so brash as whoever put Rosina's beau up to his attempt.

So it was that Artemio made his way to the side of the great courtyard between the houses and settled on the edge of a marble flowerpot with his wine bottle in hand. There he sat as the night drew on, watching those grand lords and ladies who insisted on arriving late so that their entrance might be observed by as many as possible.

Duchesses and Dukes from all corners of the Kingdom had gathered here in the city for Gemmazione, and would not make their return until towards the end of the arid summer season. Travelling in the morning and the evening to avoid the worst of the heat to ensure that they were back in plenty of time to oversee the labour of their peasantry when the harvest was upon them. Not to help of course, but to ensure that none of them slacked. It was a well-known aphorism among the landed gentry that just as a watched kettle never boiled, an unwatched peasant never worked.

He drank, and he scowled and he sneered at anyone fool enough to make eye contact with him. In short, he made a spectacle of himself. An obnoxious display that he considered to be both beneath him, and necessary. One way or another, he needed to put all of the unrelated threats down. Inside the house, in the swirl of the ball, any number of the noble families might have approached him and made their intentions about his future known. They could have done it in absolute anonymity, winning him over to them without running any risk of political backlash. Out here, they had to be seen to support him.

Not one person had come over to congratulate him when he diffused the duel without bloodshed. Not one had cried out in his defence when a botched attempt was made on his life. The silence had been deafening, and he needed it to end. If even one other family showed an interest in him, then it could be

leveraged into protection against the rest. There was a complex web of alliances between the different houses, bound by marriages and common interests, and even the least of them could offer up more protection than his own through the right plucking on that web. Even if they weren't actively trying to protect him, his association with them would suggest that an attempt on his life may be an affront to that family, and since the greater families often used the lesser ones in their thrall as cat-paws in these games, there was no telling how large a sleeping bear might be stirred.

The hours rolled on, Artemio's wine bottle emptied out to bitter dregs and he laid it aside. All the aches of his tumble earlier now crept up to haunt him, blending with the strange hollow feeling of trading away fragments of his life to the shades and making his mood even more grim. They were really going to leave him out here to hang.

A servant cautiously approached with another bottle of red balanced carefully on a silvered tray, and with nothing else to keep off the evening chill, Artemio reached for it. Upon the tray were notes. A half dozen of them in all. None bearing an official seal, but every one of the indubitably from one of the houses trying to curry his favour moving forward.

The Anatra would be one of the note-scribblers, of course. The invitation to the ball could be denied as a mistake if they really needed to, and there were always arguments to be made that a party was not made without some scoundrel causing trouble, allowing for the invitation of said scoundrel without any loss of face. Still, Artemio felt certain that they were well connected and conniving enough to be in the know before the Aquila's at least. Or at least cunning enough that they would not have been manipulated into inviting him by some third party without seeing some direct benefit. He could trust in them to be tacitly on his side while offering nothing. That was more or less the reason that they had accumulated such wealth, power and station in the city to begin with. Playing all sides and taking none.

He gathered up the notes from off the tray, after carefully retrieving the wine and giving thanks to the serving boy. Pristinely human in his livery. For a moment the boy dithered on the spot, as though he were waiting for a reply to the bundle of notes, then he leaned in close and whispered, "There is one true king."

It was an innocuous enough statement in most places. Even in Espher it was hardly sedition to claim that but one of the Cerva twins was the true ruler and the other a placeholder. But spoken here, to Artemio, it had a weight to it.

Artemio looked from the servant's solemn face to glance around the courtyard to make sure that nobody else was listening in. None of the smattering of nobles passing through would dare to look this way, and they had swerved well clear of this whole side of the courtyard. The servants though. Some of them were looking over at Artemio with that very same expression on their faces. Somewhere between concern and admiration. He didn't know what to do with that information.

Feeling awkward, he turned back to his notes, he had the list of names that he required should his investigation be abruptly cut short. A laundry list of the rich and powerful of Espher, every one of them too cowardly to show open support for him but quite willing to court his favour now that they'd found a way around that impediment.

Here was all the effusive praise that he'd deserved for resolving the duel without bloodshed, the thanks for attending despite the circumstances, the praise for undertaking so onerous and dangerous a task for

Kings and country. Every letter written in the same stilted formal speech, the words blending together from one to the next in their oppressive similarity. By the end he could scarcely recall who had written what. There was no clever cipher or secret message here, just tentative outreach to a potential ally.

Far from where he held court, dancers began to pour out from the main house. The festivities finally raucous enough that they could no longer be contained by walls. The music seemed to follow them out as the servants scattered, and it was enough to make Artemio glance up in confusion before he spotted more musicians tucked away amongst the shrubs.

No eyes turned his way, but he was most certainly being observed from the periphery of the dancer's vision. It did not matter that they looked half in their cups and lost to the dance, that was a simple lie for the nobility. His continued presence was noted, his refusal of the Anatra's protection mentally filed away and the notes that he had received observed. At this distance, the seals and contents could not be deciphered, only the volume of them.

With a start, Artemio realised that this stack of letters might prove more valuable than any number of polite conversations in plain sight. If he had been approached in person, then the parameters of his relationship to each of the other houses would have been clearly defined, but by refusing to commit, the nobles courting him had given him something much more dangerous. The contents of those letters were unknown. The writers, unknown, beyond their presence at this very ball. He could be an ally to any house. From the grandest to the smallest.

He went through them again, not actually reading anything, but giving everyone the opportunity to see him reading them. Making sure to smile as he folded each one in turn and tucked it into his jacket.

The imbecile fiancé would be the last attempt on him that may be unrelated to the assassinations. Of that he was certain.

It was more than he could have hoped to achieve when the evening began, and with Harmony off conducting her own investigations in relative anonymity, he considered his time on duty to be officially over. The Anatra cellars were cold and deep, full of wines of such vintage that the Kings themselves could scarcely have asked for better. It was time to get back to the serious business of drinking them dry.