

Bloodbound
The Last King 2
David Estes & GD Penman

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Dawn had brought with it fresh madness, and it took little time for Harmony to begin sharing her ill temper. She had been placed in the position of defending her brother's choices even when they were in complete opposition to what she herself would have done, and it took little time before that took its toll too.

The running of a siege was no small matter, even at the best of times, and these were far from them. There were supplies to secure, scouts to post, plans to be made. Every moment from sunrise she had been bombarded with questions that she had no answer to. She knew nothing of warfare, beyond the personal component that involved pushing sharp objects into people. Delegation seemed the key to success, but she did not know which of the many lords and ladies who presented themselves as experts knew the first thing about this business, and she suspected that in truth not one of them had either the knowledge or experience required to make a success of their tasks.

Relying upon Duchess Granchio's judgement became a necessity early on, but Harmony could not shake the idea that the woman's forthright nature didn't actually prevent her from rearranging things to best suit herself, but instead made it so blatant that it no longer looked like guile at work. She suspected that if or when the woman stabbed her in the back, she'd proudly inform Harmony of the fact and ask her to turn around to save them any dancing about.

The worst part of it all, to Harmony's mind, was that she did not know her own mind. Ever since she saw Orsina fall, her thoughts had been in chaos. She had been pulled in every direction and not once did she feel like the choices she was making were her own.

Here, she was doing her brother's will. Back on the battlefield, she had been dragged by her love to chase after Orsina, even if it meant crossing the veil of death.

The clarity of thought she had always cherished by unloading all of the heavy lifting of decision making onto Artemio was gone. Art was gone. He had walked blithely into the jaws of

death, just as Orsina had flung herself into doom. The only small comfort that Harmony felt was the knowledge that if he was killed, at least she would know about it. Admittedly, that was because she would be instantly killed too, but at least there would be none of this accursed doubt lingering around.

It was not until a meal was forced upon her by some secretaries that she realized how much of the day had already gone. The sun had passed its zenith somewhere up above the gathering storm-clouds while she was debating the merits of dividing their forces even more thinly so that parties could be sent out to seek reinforcement from those distant country nobles who had not provided manpower to the army, or at least to raid their winter stocks so that the exhausted and wounded soldiers they'd dragged back home might not starve or freeze out here on the open plains.

With her at its head, the gathered army still seemed to be rudderless. Every minor disagreement a divide just waiting to crack open and tear the whole endeavor apart. With her gone, she could not imagine it would hold. Without someone forcing all the bickering fools of court to behave themselves, she'd have bet that it wouldn't last a day before the various factions with their myriad petty grievances realized that they currently had a small but functional army ready to march against anyone they disliked farther along the curved battle line. An attempt by Agrant to break the siege might have galvanized them, but none seemed to be forthcoming.

If anything, the absolute silence from the city did more to foster dread and dissent than anything else. There had not been sign or word from within. No sign that the capital they now stood watch over was not a necropolis. Even the many Shadebound among their number could not penetrate the age-old defenses of the city to confirm or deny the rumors that rippled through the lines.

Which brought Harmony to something of a problem. Artemio had left her in charge of this motley band of infighting imbeciles, but he had also left her with explicit instructions on how to enter the city under the cover of night, alone.

She cursed the contradiction. Cursed him for making her the one who had to decide what course to follow. All of her life, she had been following orders, first her father's, then Art's when it became clear that the old man was a few prickles short of a hedgehog. She had focused on keeping him safe, on making herself into the best protector and partner he could require, but in turn she had given up on so many of the things that made her into her own person. It was only

with the arrival of Orsina and the blossoming of whatever it was they had that she had begun to push back against her brother's unshakeable commandments. It was only as she was just beginning to see the light of day that everything had come collapsing in on her again.

She could feel the pressure mounting as the sun slipped lower in the sky. The time for her decision was swiftly approaching, and to make matters worse, there was nobody she could talk to. Art had always been there to help her through every decision. If not him, then Orsina. She was not used to holding whole arguments in her head instead of allowing them to spill out. She did not know who she was, or what she would do, without another person to reflect it back to her.

Duchess Granchio was almost brought into her confidence several times through the late afternoon, as she struggled internally with making the decision. But as much as she may have been struggling, and as well as Granchio was serving her purpose, Harmony was not a fool.

Granchio was already well positioned to take over command of the army after the day they had just spent working in harmony to pummel it into some semblance of order. By might of arms, whosoever controlled the army implicitly ruled all of Espher in this moment. The temptation must have been there from the start to remove Harmony from the equation and to place herself upon the makeshift throne. Harmony certainly wasn't going to offer up more temptation by giving Granchio a clean shot at her.

There were two ways that it could go if she trusted Granchio. She would be decried by everyone for abandoning her post and all of her extremely temporary control over the situation would be snatched away before she could make her move, or the duchess could allow her to proceed with her plan to enter Covotana and make just enough noise outside the walls at an inopportune moment to result in Harmony's untimely death by guardsmen. The latter had the added bonus of eliminating Artemio from the equation too, so that no vengeance might be sought if he did come sauntering back out of the city.

There was nobody in the Espheran camp she could trust with the truth of what she was going to do, so when dawn came and the courtiers gathered to demand more wisdom she had never claimed to possess, they would find her bedroll lying empty and their army entirely without command. There would be squabbling and bickering and likely outright bloodshed over the right to lead. Once that dust had settled, there would be the question of direction in the aftermath. Would whoever took the reins stay the course? Would they abandon Covotana to protect their

own holdings from what seemed an inevitable full invasion from the south? Would whoever mastered the army care enough about the Volpes to resist the natural call to valor and attack the city head-on? There were too many questions, but in the flux of them, Harmony realized that she had one answer at least.

She was no longer considering the possibility of staying put. If she could find out whether Orsina was alive, then she had to. Just as she'd been feeling sorry for herself for having never made a decision in her life, even this one seemed to have been snatched out of her hands. Here in the camp barking orders, she was worse than useless, but in the city, she could find the answers she was seeking.

When it came down to it, it hardly seemed a choice at all.

Night fell. She recused herself from her duties and slunk away to her tent showing every part of her exhaustion in every line of her body. She had never been a talented liar, but in this case no deception was required. Inside the dubious privacy of her tent, she went about the motions, taking her mean sustenance—no larger a ration than any of the soldiers received—and then stripped out of the dress that politeness dictated she wore even here in the midst of the mud. Once it was off, she left it lying on the sunken boards and gave serious consideration to kicking it.

It wasn't that she took any satisfaction in dressing like a man, she had always been very clear with Artemio about that when she borrowed his shirts and trousers, it was just that there was a limited range of motion, and limited practicality, in the dresses she was expected to wear. She needed to run, she needed to duck and dodge and spin and thrust. She did not need to look like an overly ornamental cake trapped on a plate.

So, she dug through the chest of clothing Artemio had left behind, mediocre as it was, and looked for an outfit in which to break into a city. All-black probably would have been the preference, to let her pass under cover of darkness unseen, but that would have presented a problem once she was inside the city. Someone dressed entirely in black would stand out, someone dressed in normal clothes could blend into a crowd. Once more, the decision was made for her, in this case by Artemio's limited wardrobe. She chose some navy blue and the same crisp white shirts that Art always seemed to be wearing, layered on what she could to hold off the night's cold, and then buckled her sword belt around it all. To that she added a knife, not of

military construction, but from the board her dinner had been served on, tucked through the belt in case she found herself fighting in close quarters.

Finally, there was no more delay to be had, the sun was long down, the campfires about the siege burned bright, and it was time to go.

There was a tremor in her hands as she pried up the canvas and slipped outside, not from the effort or the cold, but from nerves. She did not fear the Agrantine; she did not even worry that in their much-vaunted saints she would meet her match. When it came to a straight fight between her and any number of men, she would always have bet heavily upon herself. But talent with the blade could not turn a crossbow bolt in the dark. If she was seen, the best she could hope for was death.

You did not grow to adulthood in a strict home without some degree of stealth training, but there was a vast difference between avoiding the creaking floorboard on the landing and approaching a besieged city under cover of darkness. For one thing, the air was crisp with frost and every breath that she drew seemed loud and felt sharp. For another, moving silently in boots fit for battlefield mud was a whole new conundrum, involving arching her foot inside them to stop the inevitable sucking sound as she lifted off from the ground. Every day was a learning experience.

She managed a grim smile to bolster her courage, then quickly closed her mouth again when she felt the cold in her teeth. She was not looking forward to dealing with the water.

To begin with, she was moving through Espheran camps, skirting the warm glow of the fires and the sounds of soldiers' banter. It was hard not to creep closer and bask in the humanity of it. But not so hard that she was truly tempted. Around and around she went, along the curving line of fires that encircled Covotana. Drifting from the outer edge to the inner one as she moved between different nobles' battalions. United they might stand, but by night they lay segregated by whoever paid their bill.

It was not so much the cold or the dread that was making Harmony consider giving up and heading back to her tent. It was the tension. There was no moment where she did not have to be entirely focused on everything she was doing and everything that was going on around her. On the battlefield that was an elation; now, so prolonged, it was a torment. Every movement had to be measured. She had to lurk in the long shadows, waiting for a man to fling up his hand in the midst of a tale so that the motion would cover her own.

If she were caught now, by her own men, she would not die. Her night's quest would be over, of course, but she herself would go on. It would become a joke, a subject for snide comments. It would rob her of any ability to command, and gradually and quietly she would be shuffled away with comments about her brother's superiority. But she would live.

The letter that she had left for Baroness Granchio as a seal of approval would never be read; the curmudgeonly old woman would never assume command, never rise to the role that she had been born for. Everything would become chaotic, and Espher's army would falter. At this point, she didn't give all that much of a damn, personally, but there was no question that Art would. She bent even lower as she passed by the next fire, moving out into the empty land between the siege and the city. She would stand out more clearly in the space beyond the shadows' end, but her journey around the walls wasn't yet done, and with a slow drift inwards she hoped to avoid any alarm if she was spotted. Just another soldier, wandering off from camp to make water. Making it in a dangerous place perhaps, but it wouldn't be entirely unexpected. She pattered along, until she passed beyond one encampment, and then she was out far enough that neither the flames of camp nor the torches of the city touched her. The dark silent band between them where she was safe, where she could breathe without fear of it being heard.

Yet still she found she could not breathe. That each drag of air was a struggle. That her muscles tensed as though they sought to pull against her. She was certain she could not be seen by the starlight or the waning moon, but still she felt as if she must fling herself down. She was in reach of that unseen, whistling crossbow bolt in the dark now. That sudden, unknowable, ignominious death.

She couldn't even muster terror. Not really. It wasn't the death that she feared, but the failing. To fear death was the burden of commoners. Noble children were raised to know dishonor was a far more terrible thing. You could only die for a moment, but if you showed cowardice, that would be a tarnish on your family name for generations to come. Your shade, were it called at all, would be bound to some thankless industry unworthy of your station, passed off to some lesser line for a favor.

Failure, though, she had been drilled in failure since she was old enough to speak. Until Artemio showed his gift, they were both treated with the same rough hand, snapped back into place if they ever seemed to be growing askew. Even once their father's focus tightened to only Art, some of the disdain still washed out over her. At least until she learned that excellence in all

things was the ideal way to deflect it, and she proved herself time and again. With each success, the standards rose. A never-ending spiral staircase that she had to race up at a full gallop if she had any hope of holding off the contempt.

It had made her who she was, as strong as she was, as quick as she was, and as broken.

She could do this. She could do anything. Here in the darkness, she would not be seen, and the sounds that she made in her hurry would be concealed as she drew close to the sound of rushing water. She moved more swiftly now, focus returning as her blood heated with motion. The dreamlike quality of the whole strange night fled as her heart beat harder.

The waterway outlet was a thick iron grate in the white walls of the city set up six feet to keep animals from wandering in. If Harmony was not running, she wouldn't have had the momentum to leap up and catch onto it. If she wasn't running, she might have thought just how loud rusted metal could be when it shifted in its stone sockets. It practically screamed as she hung there, paralyzed with shock for a moment before she hauled herself up.

It was done now, no going back. If whichever unfortunate guard had drawn the short straw to stand watch over the drain had heard, then Harmony would just have to deal with the consequences.

She swung her legs down and kicked off the wall. Flinging herself out, drawing another rusty screech, her toes caught on the lip, and she was able to haul herself up. The crisscrossing bars were black by the moonlight, but it was a darkness that came away on her hands. She would be stained with the rust, all Art's fine clothes smudged with orange and brown by the time she pushed her way through the gap. For a grown man, there wouldn't have been enough room between the bars to gain entry, but for all her efforts building her strength, Harmony was still slim enough at the shoulders that there was only one uncomfortable moment before she was through, dropping hands down into the flow of sullied water.

She scrambled for something to grasp so she could haul her hips through. The sword caught on the grate, and the knife fell from where it had been tucked, tumbling into the flow of water. The cacophony of the metal had only grown worse as she wriggled through, finally going silent when she twisted entirely around and managed to get unhooked.

Without the grate holding her up, she was dropped onto her back in the water. It rushed over her, deafening her and blinding her to whoever was out there. In that moment of failure, she

could have died and felt that she deserved it, but when she shot up out of the water like a cork from spring wine, she was untouched and unseen.

A swift tug on her belt put everything back into place, and she was just considering how worthwhile searching for the knife would be when she heard death coming.

Death, in this case, sounded like the slapping of wet boots on stone. Someone else was in the waterway. She could have flung herself against a wall and hoped they didn't have a torch, but that felt like flinging herself from a tall building and hoping gravity just wouldn't notice. Instead, she did the only thing she could: She drew her sword and charged.

The waterway branched once it was out from under the wall, a dozen tunnels spreading beneath the city, gathering all that drained from the decorative fountains and the overflows of the canals. There was none of the pristine white stone down here. It was dug into the caldera itself; they were down in the crust of volcanic stone that the white polish was meant to hide. Black as night and rough as pumice. Here and there, a bubble showed, bitten into the rock so long ago that Harmony could not conceive of it. If she could find one big enough, she could duck inside, ambush the guard. She'd have a chance instead of running headlong towards the ever-louder thump of boots.

Fate did not furnish her with such an easy way out.

She burst out of the first tunnel she'd taken, and the last filtering moonlight faded. She was alone in total darkness and heading down a slippery slope into a narrower passage filled with water almost to the depth of her knees before she had even registered what was happening. Leaves and the smell of rot swirled around her.

Still the boots came closer.

Her own sounds echoed everywhere in this confined space. Booming along to alert the guard that there was someone here. Sloshing through the water slowed her, but it also disguised her passage better. The racket of all the water flushed through these tunnels provided a mask to her own splashing. She could only hope it would be enough.

Torchlight brightened the far end of the floodway, and with one last desperate gulp of air, Harmony ducked back down into the putrid water. Eyes scrunched up tight to keep every drop of the foul liquid out. Nose held to keep bubbles from escaping.

As it turned out, feeling like she was holding her breath differed greatly from actually holding it. The same tension was there, but now there came a burning too, starting by her

hammering heart and slowly spreading out until she felt like it encompassed her whole being. Until all she could feel was the burning and the oily slick shifting of what she was generously calling water.

When she couldn't stand it anymore, she had to surface, the burning air dragging her body up. She blew and spat as she emerged, trying not to taste the sweet corruption clinging to her lips. The light was gone; the guard had passed. She had to move.

The exhaustion of the day had been compounded by her little swim. Every part of her ached as she dragged her way along the tunnel in the direction that the light had come from, on the basis that it was the most likely path towards the surface. Or at least the direction that the guard was no longer in. She never quite managed more than a squelching jog through the pitch black of the tunnel, tracing one hand along the side to guide herself deeper.

She should have thought ahead. She should have brought a lantern. It would have been washed out by her little dip, but if she could see a damned thing, she might have been able to find another way around that. Each time she felt an opening beneath her hand, she ignored it and carried on straight ahead. Eventually she would reach a dead end or a way out. Then she could worry about choosing a turn.

Her foot came down into open air instead of soaked stone, and she tumbled forward. For a moment her mind could make no sense of what was happening, and then it had already happened. Her hand had snapped out and hooked in a pocket of water in the volcanic stone, her sword had battered off the stone as it rushed invisibly by her face. She might have fallen inches or miles, and there'd be no way to know until someone shone a light. Sound echoed around her in the chimney of stone, her own haggard breathing and the scrape of her boots as they tried to make more solid purchase. She ended up spread-eagled like a trodden frog on the wall. Hand and feet digging into the puddled indents where air bubbles had been expanded out by time and the flow of sewerage.

Muscles already strained and screaming, she tried to tuck her sword back in its scabbard to get another point of contact free and succeeded only in overbalancing herself. Harmony skidded down the slime-streaked wall. She was still blind, still scrabbling with bloodied fingers for anything to hold on to; she didn't manage to stop herself again.

The wall gave way to open air, just as the floor had a moment before, and for one long awful moment she was just spinning in emptiness. Then she hit the water.

By all rights, she should have considered herself very lucky to have landed in water rather than on any of the much more solid materials of which this place was constructed, but with the air smacked out of her from the impact on the surface and the foul water rushing into her mouth when she gasped trying to replace it, Harmony was not feeling lucky. She choked and spluttered and scrambled for the side of the pool, the weight of her sodden clothes pulling her down and only her dwindling strength dragging her up.

For the first time, she realized that she might actually die down here in the dark. It wouldn't be glorious or recorded in Artemio's histories. It wouldn't even be fair. She would just go from alive to not because she drowned or slipped. Nobody would ever find her body. It would decompose and come apart and wash away from the city, and there would be no trace of her left.

Her fingers sparked with pain as they made contact with the side. But compared with the dull chill spreading through her, the pain was almost welcome. She managed to grip onto the stone and pulled herself up, only to hit a wall. It was a rim on the edge of the pool, not another walkway.

Resting on her elbows for a moment, treading water, and nursing the rising bruise on her head, Harmony stopped to think. She had no idea where she was or how far she had fallen. She had no map of these waterways or any idea of how they were connected to the city. Even if she could see where she was going, there were even odds of going in circles until the guards finally found her. Or until her strength gave out.

This was meant to be simple. She was meant to stroll into the city unimpeded, find Kagan, and escape with him in tow. She was not meant to have gotten lost before she even got into Covotana. She was not meant to have fallen into invisible pits in the hungering dark or half drowned herself in the overflow from the streets somewhere up above.

She didn't want to die. If she could have fallen in battle against some great enemy or fallen asleep some night in her love's arms, it might have been different, but this death had no glory, only the dull thrum of horror.

Take inventory. Plan the attack. She was bruised and battered, missing some fingernails, nothing broken yet. Her sword was inexplicably in its sheath, the comforting weight doing its best to drag her down and drown her. Reason would have dictated that she drop it, shed the weight, but that was as likely as spontaneously learning to breathe the water.

She had never given much consideration to water, prior to this moment. It had been a drink when there was no wine to be had, mostly meant for horses. She'd learned to swim under her mother's tutelage with the ever-present guardsmen standing with their backs turned to preserve her dignity, but that water had been different somehow. Harmless and even friendly. Buoying her up. She was no stranger to rain either, but that was just an irritation. This was something else entirely. Water should not have a pull to it. It should not have a strength and weight as mighty as the stone around it. Such a simple thing, known to everyone everywhere, and she'd misunderstood it completely.

"Water." She spat the word, and more of the stuff she was cursing sprayed from her lips. The water she drank had never tasted so putrid. All the runoff of the city streets, all the filth they washed away found its way down here. This was the true taste of the city, and she retched. If she'd let herself throw up into this water, it probably would have made it cleaner.

Step one of any plan would have to be getting out of the accursed stuff. Hand by hand, she inched herself around the outside of the pool, careful to stay clear of the little waterfall coming from above, feeling the chill spritz coming up from where it hit the center of the cistern.

Every few feet she'd pause and stretch up, straining her exhausted arms in the hope of finding some opening, but each time her palm struck on solid stone again. By the third time she couldn't hold back a little sob. This place had been built, once upon a time; there had to have been a way for whoever built it to get in and out. That was simple logic. A treacherous voice might have been whispering that they might have bricked off the passage afterwards, but she had to ignore it.

Harmony was going to get out of here. She was not dying without knowing what had happened to Orsina. Kagan would be waiting for her. Art was relying on her. She could drag him down into the drowning depths too. Not like this. Not for nothing.

Her shoulders had taken on the burning that her lungs had felt when she was submerged, but while that had expanded out and reached its limit swiftly enough, this burning just seemed to grow worse and worse, sending out sharp shocks along her back, her neck, her arms.

"Oh, just go in through the waterways. It won't be well guarded." She didn't know when she'd started rambling to herself, but the sound of a human voice proved a great comfort. "Of course they aren't well guarded, they're a bloody labyrinth, Art."

She hit on another flat patch of bubbled stone.

“You don’t need to guard a bloody labyrinth, because it guards itself. This one even drowns people for you.”

Another slap, another sting in her bloodied fingers. Another impassable barricade.

“What a wonderful dinner party conversation this will be. Art will be delighted to talk about how all the old dead people were terribly clever, building a maze into the one weak point in the defenses of the city. Orsina will...” Another sob caught in her throat. “Orsina...”

She had been trying not to think about Orsina. Trying not to think about the final moments when she’d fallen. When she’d won a war all by herself. Harmony had known she was powerful, it was clear from the special treatment the girl had gotten, from the way she’d come in with no education and laid her betters to waste. But to see that power unleashed. To see what her quiet, clever little mouse could do when pressed to her limits... it still seemed unreal.

“And Orsina will spend the whole time fussing over me and worrying, even though I obviously survived this mess just fine. Of course I did! It isn’t like we’re going to have a dinner party in the sewers.”

Her hand struck nothing. Flopping down to hit on flagstones or tile or whatever the ancient builders had thought was appropriate décor for their pitch-black death trap. Another little sob escaped Harmony as she realized that she still had to pull herself up.

If the water had seemed wicked before, now it became the true villain of her life story, sucking at her as she tried and failed to haul herself up. Dragging down at her dangling feet as she gave up on any hint of grace and wriggled and rolled her way out of the water like some great sodden slug being birthed.

Perhaps, in her retelling, she’d skip over this part. That and the part where she lay there in the entrance to the passage, dropped on her side like a horse run to death, heaving for breath and enduring the wretched smell of it all.

The longer she was down here, the greater her chances of being caught. She knew she had to move, but her body just refused to comply with her mind’s demands. It was quite comfortable here on the stone floor, thank you very much. Perhaps it could have a nap and then it might reconsider her demands?

She grit her teeth and rolled against the wall, setting her back against it and using her legs, which now had a similar consistency to overcooked pasta, to push herself upright. By water or steel, she was not dying down here.

The weight of her own sodden clothes seemed an insurmountable burden, but step by unsteady step she moved into the tunnel, each inch from the hiss of falling water a triumph, and a relief. As long as she kept moving, the cold couldn't seep in any deeper. As long as she kept moving, she was getting closer to a way out.

8 - By Shadow and Steel
Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

Harmony had been living in the House of Seven Shadows for more than a year. She had lived her life outside the supposed safety of her rooms blindfolded. She had the training that she needed for this place, for the dark tunnels and unmarked exploration. The fall and the chase had disoriented her, but it wasn't as though she hadn't gotten lost in the Shadebound school either. She just had to keep moving, mentally map, find the familiar, and reorient.

The distant hiss of the loathsome cistern was a beacon. She started plotting out from there, lurching from wall to wall to find openings. Registering the texture of the stone beneath her numbed fingers. She was not the genius her brother was acclaimed as. She couldn't map the whole world in her head with a glance, but she could do this. Just as she'd done it when they first arrived in Covotana. Just as they'd navigated the halls of the Osservatore by night as children.

An opening to the left, then an opening to the right, equally spaced if she was any judge. Each step, she let her foot rest solidly before lifting the other. She wasn't falling down any more holes. Down was the opposite direction to where she should be going, and it was only luck that she'd survived the last fall.

The passage curved, the smooth carved stone of masonry giving way to the rough-textured volcanic rock once more. The roof dropped to brush along the top of her hair. Tugging the few stray strands that had already managed to dry. With one hand held up in front of her face, she pressed on, plodding forward until she would have had to bend double to continue.

It was difficult to stop, to turn around and go back into territory she had already explored, but she had no choice. Not if she didn't want to risk getting stuck. Just the thought of that was enough to set her mind screaming in terror. Back she went to try a side tunnel. The one on her left came first, previously her right. No point in this blind wandering if she didn't keep track, didn't map it out, didn't think.

It occupied all her mind, the map that she was building, the demarcation between carved stone and natural tunnel. The parts that felt dry and those misted by fallen water. She needed it to occupy her mind, because the alternative was to think about the situation she was in, and that contemplation felt like a darker maze than the one she was currently walking.

A slope up ahead, slick with slime. Another overflow, leading down to the cistern. Not flowing now, but if rain came, she'd have had no hope of making it up. Even now it was a struggle. She went down on all fours, hooking with her aching fingers for the ridges in the stone for a hold as gravity tried to drag her back down. She needed to go up. The city. Kagan. Answers. Up was hope of survival.

She clawed, slipped back, scrambled, braced against the walls, and finally she made it to the top. By now the aches of the night's exertions were fading to a worryingly distant thrum. The sort she'd only found after a long day of pushing too hard in her training, when at any moment any part of her might give out without warning. There was solid carved stone beneath her hands as she pushed up to standing, the same on the walls. She couldn't help but feel that meant this was the right way. Farther into the parts man had made rather than those inherited from nature. The city was a built place, so surely built places would lead to the city.

Two exits on the left, one on the right, then the corridor hit a dead stop. She could hear her footsteps echo up above her, and reaching, she found no roof above her. A shaft. For a mad moment she considered climbing it, like she'd jostled her way up a chimney and emerged coated in soot during an overenthusiastic game of hide-and-seek as a child. Even as she reached up and felt out the size of the opening above, her arms began to tremor with the effort. She couldn't climb vertically. Not now.

Back along to take a turn, left this time. The one tunnel on that side. Another slope, but gentle this time, and nowhere near so slick. Enough to make her feel almost confident before she came upon a damper patch and her foot skittered out from under her.

This was hell.

It was the only conclusion at which Harmony could rationally arrive after what had to be hours of wandering in the dark, backtracking and branching out and turning right around again when she found another dead end. She must have died in the reeking cistern, unable to find her way out, and now she had been condemned to some netherworld for crimes against some deity or other.

Religion had never featured heavily in Espher's makeup. Having spirits with godlike powers at your beck and call slightly curbed any interest in those you couldn't directly interact with, and the general consensus was that Espher's nobility were too busy worshiping themselves to spare a thought for any higher power. Or indeed, to acknowledge that there was any higher power.

Perhaps it was this lack of faith that had led to Harmony being condemned to this netherworld. She couldn't think of any other particular affront to any given god that she might have committed. She was sure that there were some out there that would take offense at an atheist.

Every time she had to turn back, she had to go down again, slithering back into the deeper dark. She could see nothing, hear nothing, nothing but the distant, endless dripping. It may have not been hell, but this was assuredly what madness felt like. There was no question in Harmony's mind that she would be spending the rest of her nights sleeping with a candle lit by her bedside. She never wanted to be back here. Never wanted to be reminded of this awful loss of her senses.

Would she be able to endure a blindfold again, if she was to ever return to the House of Seven Shadows? She kept her thoughts busy with such worries, they served as an ideal distraction from the much larger concern. That there was no way out. That this was hopeless.

She could not doubt. It would kill her as surely as another pitfall.

Despite the dread in each leaden step, she did not find another pitfall in her travels, leading her to suspect that she was at the lowest of all possible levels. This was not a thought that filled her with joy, even if it did mean less fear of an abrupt fall. She scrambled up steep inclines and turned and backtracked, and time would have lost all meaning if she wasn't still desperately clinging to the map in her head. The smell was getting worse, and she tried to comfort herself with the thought that the reeking stench was a sure sign she was getting closer to humanity, but there was a world of difference between the runoff from the streets and fountains when compared with the foulness up ahead. The poor parts of the city made do with the same bucket or outhouse that had served mankind since time immemorial. Only the wealthy needed indoor plumbing and the sewers beneath. There was some sort of poetry to it, or possibly a bawdy limerick at least.

There was a grating in the wall up ahead of her, rusted iron crumbling to jagged shards beneath her grasp. From beyond it the reek of the sewer proper. It was the closest she'd come to an exit. There wasn't that much to the sewers compared with this nightmare of dark tunnels. She could find her way out, find her way through to the cavern where the peasants had gathered in rebellion and then out to the canal. All she had to do was get through these bars.

She tried to squeeze into the gap in the crisscross of metal, but she could barely fit her head through, let alone her shoulders. Rusted metal caught at her hair, ripped at her scalp. The sharp smell of the wet iron overtook the putrid reek from up ahead for a moment, and she realized she

was bleeding. Tears were running down her face too, blending with the muck and damp and blood. Not despair, never despair, but brutal frustration. She was so close.

Rearing back, she flung herself at the grate, as if sheer rage might overcome metal.

And it did.

The ancient rat-chewed mortar crumbled. The bars, rusted through, snapped. Harmony tumbled through, ripping clothes and flesh on the jagged remnants that were left behind. Momentum carried her on, past the rim of tilework and into the causeway beyond. Falling face-first into what lay down there.

Her wounds burned at its touch. If she didn't die down here, disease was almost sure to take root. Her eyes and her mouth had slammed shut on impact with the bars, but it oozed up her nose, into her ears. Rearing up out of the filth, she tried to wipe it away with hands that were just as filthy.

This time she was sick, the dinner she'd eaten a lifetime ago burning back up her throat. It went on and on, racking her until she had nothing left inside but bile. With one last spit to clear her mouth, she stumbled on, clattering her shins on the raised side of the tunnel before struggling her way out.

The miasma rising up off the flow was enough to overwhelm all her other senses, but before she'd gotten out, she'd felt the slow drift of the unmentionable things around her. She knew which way this sewer was running, so she went against that flow, trudging along with the same dogged determination that had carried her through so many hours in the dark. One hand trailing the filth crusted on the walls, one foot stamping down before each step to be sure that it was solid ahead.

Even as the vileness pressed in all around her, she could not help feeling hope burning as surely as her infection.

She was going to live. She was going to make it. This was all going to be worth it.

Ahead of her, she saw shapes. Dim and grey and faded, but still, it meant light and sight were returning. She was so overjoyed that she staggered forward. So exultant in her coming freedom that as the flames burned brighter, dancing on the walls, it did not even occur to her that there was anything to fear.

She could not hear the footsteps approaching for her own squelching run. She could not bring any rational fear to bear when life was just around the corner.

Rounding the bend at a skidding pace, she breathed in the distant hint of fresh air. Then her long-useless eyes finally did their work, and she saw that between her and the distant open sky, a sword-saint stood waiting. Torch held aloft in one hand; sword drawn with the other.

“Who goes there?” he asked, though it seemed to be habitual rather than out of any real desire for an answer. She blinked hard, forcing her mind to process what her eyes were seeing. Dark brows drawn low, shaved head, dark robes, sword. Stance wasn’t familiar, but the level and angle of the sword held out before him was. Classic low guard.

Harmony could only imagine what she looked like after the journey through hell she had just endured. Some swamp shade crawling from the pits. And swamp was probably being generous given the various aromas swirling around her.

The taste of foulness was still on her lips when they parted. “Would you believe I’m just an innocent peasant who fell down a privy?”

She saw his lips moving as he translated her words into his own language.

Finally, he translated an answer back. “Would anyone?”

With a dull sense of obligation, Harmony drew her sword. The blade was streaked with water and worse, but it still shone in the torchlight. “I should imagine a cut from this will leave your wound poisoned.”

Another pause as he put together his words. “Is it not lucky that it isn’t going to touch me?”

As he advanced, long-drilled memories moved Harmony into a fighting stance, but even those automatic motions were sluggish. She was so far beyond tired that she had almost reached the distant shore on the other side where she could no longer feel her body anymore. There was no way in which she might win a fight in this state. A toddler could knock her down with a stick. Yet what other choice did she have but to fight? There would be no surrender. She did not look like a noblewoman now, and there would be no ransom on a peasant girl with a sword. All the protections she had taken for granted had fallen away.

“I can make this quick. Will you agree not to cause me trouble?”

“Oh, you stupid creature.” She forced a smile, even though it tasted like death. “I love trouble the way other women love baubles and babies.”

He feigned at her left, a classic opening of Espheran fencing, even if he used a cut instead of a thrust. She could see in the set of his feet that there would be no power behind it. Enough to

kill her certainly, but not to break a guard. She sprang forward past the swipe, thrusting for his heart.

Or she would have, if her feet didn't feel like lead and her arm could bear the weight of her weapon.

She was bludgeoned in the chest by the hilt of his sword for her uneven hop forward, stumbling sideways towards the stream of sewage and almost tripping right over the edge. While she may not have been so heavily endowed in the area of her chest as some of her so-called peers, there was certainly enough there that it cushioned the blow and hurt so badly she almost folded up around it.

She wheezed out, "Rude."

Wasting time on words was not wise. With a twist of the wrist the saint's blade went from parallel to Harmony to sweeping down at her from above. He must have swept it around, but the motion had been too quick for her dulled senses to follow. Only jumping back into the stream of sewage kept her innards from becoming her outtards.

"I don't suppose that you could be convinced that I'd changed my mind and wish to come quietly?"

She'd surrendered the high ground and solid footing. In a sparring match, the opponent would usually allow her to concede when she was at such a disadvantage. Apparently the saint had not heard of that courtesy. Just before his blade touched the ground, he thrust forward, slipping under any defense she might have raised.

Only luck saved her. Her heel had come down on what may have been a dead rat or simply a particularly robust example of why a diet of only meats and cheeses were bad for the nobility. As she fumbled to get her blade around and parry, she slipped.

The razor edge of the saint's sword grazed past her cheek as she fell, parting those unfortunate hairs by her ear that had not been plastered down by filth.

She slid or was dragged along by the current. As her face hit the water, she was blinded for a moment. It was more luck, keeping her from the immediate skewering that the saint was inevitably trying to deliver.

She flung herself into a roll, trying to regain her footing and bringing her blade about. Her eyes burned; she moved on instinct. Practice guided her blade up to parry the next thrust, but the jarring force of it left her arm aching. She was not facing a fencer with a rapier. This was a

length of solid metal being swung about with the same deft grace as the delicate needle of steel she wielded.

There was a moment's respite as her sight returned. The saint sniffed at the air, then hopped down into the channel to face her on equal footing. "Do you have no more words to bandy around with me?"

He strode forward, cutting at her from one side then the next, the torch flaring green behind him as foul gases erupted from the flow around their knees. She parried one cut, but it drove her guard down so hard that she had to fling herself clear of the next cut, again. Giving ground. Losing.

In her best form, she'd have been pressed to keep up with this man. Today she'd be lucky to survive long enough to curse his name.

As she fell, she kicked out, twisting his knee out from the impact so he couldn't follow up. It was a desperate move, but she was desperate, so it was apt. Her arm had scarcely brushed the soft bottom of the channel before she was springing back up, flicking her now cupped hand at the saint's face. The scoop of sewage fell between them, striking the hem of his already soiled robes.

"Are all of Espher's fighters so pathetic?"

He was trying to rile her, trying to get her on the offensive instead of having to chase her down. If she could have felt any emotion beyond exhausted numbness, perhaps it would have been effective, and he would have been able to cut her down and get on with the more important business of washing off his boots. But she didn't feel a thing.

She did stumble forward to face him, but that was mostly from the momentum of regaining her feet, and what he might have hoped were thrusts made clumsy by anger were purely clumsy because she was half asleep on her feet. He parried each with barely a flicker from his ready stance, slapping them wide with the flat of his blade and awaiting the opportunity that was sure to come. When she thrust for his face, he leaned a little to the side and brought his blade around to block her from slicing at him on the way back. It was a casual motion, arrogant, born of repetition. She saw bits and pieces of an Espheran fencer's motions in his art, and she wanted to test how much of it would play out here. When she pressed in at his neck, they locked blades, just as they'd both been trained, her lesser weight against his bulk. His strength against hers.

There was no way she could win a test of might. The close game was for brutes and butchers when it came to fencing, and just the weight of his weapon would have been enough to turn the

fight against her. He pressed, and she bowed back. His face a dark mask, silhouetted by the torch behind him. “No more wit?”

She pursed her lips and spat. All the fouled water that had rushed into her mouth when she’d fallen, she’d kept there, and now it went into his face. Into his eyes. Burning them, just as hers had been burning all night. He let out a shrill cry. Whether disgust or pain, Harmony didn’t know.

He reared back, and she hooked a foot out to catch him behind the ankle and pushed. She rode him down, blades still locked. He had just opened his mouth to bellow in rage as he disappeared under the scummy surface of the sewage.

His torch went under with him, and the world plunged back into total darkness. Harmony could feel him shifting beneath her, their blades scraping together. He wasn’t getting out that easily. He might have had weight on her, but she had leverage on her side now. She had the high ground, such as it was, and she could bring all her weight down to keep his blade pinned to his chest. His body held beneath the surface. His mouth had already been open. The sewage must have rushed in. As he tried to retch and spit it out, more would intrude. All the indignities she had suffered through in the hours of the labyrinth, were inflicted on him in a moment.

As he bucked beneath her, she did not move. All pressure on the sword abandoned, she did not move. Only when his scrabbling hands clawed up the length of her and caught hold of her arms did she finally haul herself up. He burst out of the sewage, gasping for air and only managing to gulp down more of the filth.

It would be his last breath.

Harmony slammed the tip of her rapier down into his chest. Glancing off submerged bone, then hitting home in the soft red beneath. His piss-rimmed eyes bulged wide, and then he sank back into the flow.

Shaking and stumbling, she put her foot onto his chest to stop him drifting away, and she waited. Beneath her, the body jerked once, twice. Bubbles came up to the surface. The red of his blood already washed away in the kaleidoscope of effluence flowing by.

She waited for the very last tremors to pass through him. She waited until she was sure he was dead. So many hours had been wasted down in the tunnels. What were a few extra minutes now to keep a knife from her back?

When at last she was satisfied that the work was done, she fumbled her sword back into its clogged sheath and staggered towards the distant breeze.

So close now. She couldn't taste it, because her mouth was full of bile and things more vile, but she could feel it even through the layers of grime on her skin. Even through the thick crust forming all over her, the cool of fresh air cut in.

She was going to live. She was going to make it. After everything she had endured, she was going to survive. And she was going to take a bath. More than one. A hundred baths.

Light glowed at the end of the tunnel. Not bright torchlight or the blinding sun but the soft touch of moonlight drifting in, as though through a veil. Now the end was in sight, she almost faltered. The strength that should have long ago departed had been replaced at some point by sheer willpower, but even that was not a limitless resource, and somewhere between the dark and the fight and the sewage, it had given out. She rested, with one hand against the wall, the way it had been all along the tunnel. The flow of sewage and the side channels it had flowed from had been left behind, but out of habit, she was still tracing her way along by touch.

Just a few more steps and it was over. Just a little farther.

She marshaled what was left of her determination and stumbled on, coming up the slope, pressing through the wide bars blocking entry to the sewer, and then stopping face-to-face with another saint.

This one carried no torch, relying on the lanterns in the street above the culvert. It left her other hand free to push her robes back as she drew her sword in the face of the monster that had just crawled out of the drain.

Harmony reached for her own sword with exaggerated slowness. Less from a desire to be unnoticed and more because it hurt too much to move. "I don't suppose I could convince you that..." She met the blank stare of the saint. "Never mind."

Even when she dragged her sword out, it hung limp in her hand. The strength to actually wield it was long gone. Down in the sewers, all the misfortune she'd suffered through the night had twisted back around into good luck when the time came to fight. She couldn't imagine the same would be true now. Even the clash of steel would be enough to draw attention and bring enemy reinforcements down on her head.

As she tried to lift it into a guard, the sword tumbled from her numb fingers to clatter on the cobblestones. There was no fight left in her.

If she announced her name and station, threw herself upon Agrantine mercy, there was a chance she might survive. It was not a good chance, but it was better than her odds of winning a fight against a sword-saint with her bare hands when she couldn't even muster up a clenched fist.

"I'm not a peasant. Or a shade. Or whatever you think I am coming crawling out the drains. I'm Harmony Volpe. Sister of the duke? The duke your ambassador is trying to negotiate peace with. Probably wouldn't want to make him angry."

The same placid, blank stare. Harmony had the awful sinking feeling in the tangle of her guts that perhaps the last saint she'd encountered had been an outlier rather than the norm when it came to learning the language of the countries they conquered. Harmony spoke only a few words of Agrantine herself, and none of them were repeatable in polite company. They certainly wouldn't be the kinds of phrases that might get her out of a fight. Quite the opposite.

Like most Espherans, Harmony's approach to those who could not speak her language was to speak slower, louder, and more condescendingly. "I give up. Take me prisoner."

The saint stalked closer, eyes flitting from her empty hands down to the sword at her feet. Harmony nudged it forward with her toes. "See. No weapon. I surrender."

It did not seem that her submission was being accepted. The saint's motions were still slow, suspicious. Waiting for the other shoe to drop. Her eyes now shot from Harmony to the dark opening behind her, to the sides of the culvert where any allies might be lurking.

"I'm all alone. I came alone, like an idiot."

Seeming to make up her mind, the saint took another step forward, gesturing towards the ground with her off-hand.

"You want me to kneel? You want me to pick up my sword? What do you want?"

A harsh word in Agrantine rolled over her, and she stumbled back a step in surprise. The sudden motion set the saint off. She hefted her blade and was stepping in to swing at Harmony when she abruptly stopped mid-step. Another harsh word, this time whispered. More of a groan than a word.

She jerked, again and again, trying to twist and strike behind her, but she, too, seemed to have been suddenly overcome by the same weakness that had taken Harmony. It was as though her legs had frozen in place as her upper body contorted and twisted, but it was only as she fell to her knees that the saint finally had the good sense to open her mouth and scream for help.

It gurgled up her throat but was cut off. Quite literally cut off as a grasping, hairy hand caught her by the bare scalp, yanked her head back, and a knife sliced across her throat.

Dead, or close enough. She flopped forward onto the stone, leaving Harmony face-to-face with her rescuer.

9 - Dead of Night

Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

As it turned out, her hero in the night was a small woman in a peasant's fraying cloak worn over modest black that wouldn't have looked out of place on one of the Agrantine. Her face was the wrong shape, twisted out as though lips and nose were merging into one. That elongation had forced her front teeth out to hang over her bottom lip. A mongrel then. But not an unfamiliar one.

Harmony's exhausted brain could barely process what was in front of her. "You."

"Me," the rat-maid replied shakily. "Now come with me, I beg you. We must get off the streets. There will be trouble when they find a dead saint."

The pair of them looked down at the much-punctured body between them, then Harmony reached down and managed to scoop up her sword on the second attempt. She felt drunk. Words slurring as she said, "We could hide the body?"

The mongrel cocked her head to one side. "Can you lift her?"

Harmony looked down at the dead woman, calculated the weight, subtracted her own exhaustion and quivering muscles. "Not at the moment, no."

"Me neither." The rat-maid shrugged. "Let's go."

They scurried up the culvert, the maid because that was how she was built, Harmony because she was sagging ever more under the cruel draw of gravity and exhaustion. From there it was a quick dart across the well-lit street into an alleyway between what smelled like a tannery and what sounded like a bordello.

They paused there for a moment, rat-girl cocking her head from side to side, listening to the traffic beyond the alley mouth with her oversized ears. Harmony couldn't help but distract her. "Weren't you trying to kill me the last time we met?"

Her beady eyes narrowed. "Things change."

"You're no longer associated with the peasant rebellion?"

The maid's shoulder slumped as it became apparent that the woman almost treading on her tail was not going to shut up and let her listen. "I still go where the Last King commands."

"And this king of yours, the man in the mask." Harmony's addled brain couldn't keep up with this turn of events. "He wants you to help me?"

Beady black eyes narrowed further, until the maid looked every bit the rat she was bonded to. “He... you did not know?”

Harmony leaned back against the warm brickwork and wondered if she could fall asleep standing up. “I’m frequently confronted with the fact I don’t know anything about anything.”

The mongrel snorted. “Perhaps you should try to learn.”

Now it was Harmony’s turn to be annoyed at the interruption. She could feel sleep just out of reach. All she needed was a moment when she wasn’t thinking, and it would envelop her and carry her off to somewhere considerably more comfortable. She was mumbling as she answered with more candor than she’d intended. “Every time that I do, I just discover more things I don’t know anything about.”

They lapsed back into silence after that. Sleep did come and take Harmony. Carrying her off into the distant dull warmth of dreamless darkness. For the first time in what felt like a lifetime, she breathed in and out smoothly and without any fear or hitch. As her legs began to uncramp, and she started to slide down the wall, she startled herself awake.

The rat-maid was already in motion. “This way.”

With a choice between falling asleep in an alley still in spitting distance of a dead saint while covered in what she was continuing to politely think of as mud or following after her rescuer, the former seemed infinitely more appealing. Sure, she might die when the guards came around, but wouldn’t that just be like an even longer sleep? Yet still she moved. There was too much on her shoulders to set her burden down. Orsina. Her brother. She couldn’t lie down and die if it would cost them their lives too.

Another road was darted across, or stumbled across in Harmony’s case, then they were into the warren of backstreets and alleys that characterized the lower-class areas of Covotana. Every city had them, of course, but Covotana at least had enough shame to hide them behind the façade of civility out on the streets where those of higher birth might have been passing by.

As they wove their way through the thicket of buildings and piled refuse, Harmony piped up again. “I suppose that I should thank you, for saving my life.”

Rat-girl sneered at her. Sneering with teeth like that must have come easily. The lip was already on its way up whether intentionally or not. “That’d be polite. Wouldn’t it. My lady.”

“Is it traditional to thank an assassin when they elect to murder someone other than you?” Just the thought of thanking a servant for doing their job would have rankled her, but thanking

this particular creature made anger bubble in her stomach. Or perhaps that was simply the foul water she'd swallowed working its way back out.

"I've never..." The rat-girl rounded on her, fury blazing before it was subsumed into her usual meek pretense. "That was the first time I'd ever..."

Harmony laughed. It was not a nice laugh. The kind made when someone was amused. It was the kind that spoke of contempt and whipping. She was being rude now, but once you'd seen a rat's face sneering, anything seemed acceptable. "You seemed ready and willing enough when it was Art under your knife."

"That was different, that was..." Her nose quivered. "I thought he deserved it, for what he done to me."

Harmony rolled her eyes and strode past her, forcing the rat-maid to scurry ahead once more. "The blackmail or the pet-theft?"

She caught Harmony by the back of her matted hair and hauled her to a halt. The knife that had vanished back into the maid's aprons had found its way back into her hairy-knuckled hands. "You people, you've no idea do you? If I was to rip out half your soul and hide it somewhere, you'd want it back too. Wouldn't you?"

The knife might have been made not for battle so much as for chopping vegetables, but Harmony wasn't certain that her kidneys would be able to tell the difference. Besides, honesty worked just fine, so she didn't have to think too much. "I suppose that I would."

"You'd do near enough anything to get it back." The maid spun her around, pressed the tip of the blade against her stomach. All it would take was a little shove. It was already trying to bite through. "No matter what you had to do, right?"

Harmony glanced down at the knife between them. "Your point is made."

Rat-girl sneered again. This close, Harmony could see that her front teeth were jagged at the bottom, as though they'd once been even longer, and the girl had snapped them off somehow. Her breath felt hot in the chill night air. "Was that an apology?"

"My brother did it. Not me." She kicked out at the same time as she grabbed for the knife. If it were anyone else, she'd have taken a kneecap off. With a maid whose joints were reversed there, the effect was less brutal. The girl simply staggered back, losing her grip on the knife's handle just as it passed into Harmony's hand. "I would have just beaten the fur off you until you told me what I wanted to know."

With a flourish, she turned the knife over in her hand and offered it back to the maid. Even dead on her feet, she could still handle an untrained half rodent. “We should hurry.” They set off again, Harmony very deliberately trailing behind the maid now. “Where are we hurrying to?”

“First, we need to get you clean.”

When confronted with a foul smell over a long period of time, most people would eventually filter it out, mentally. Otherwise, such places as the tannery they had passed could not exist. Harmony herself had long ago learned not to mind the damp in the House of Seven Shadows and had barely noticed her mother’s musk-heavy perfume towards the end of her life. Yet her current predicament differed. Each time she thought she had become accustomed to the reeking effluence that was drying into her clothes and hair, she would move, and the crust would crack, and some fresh foulness would be unleashed. If there was just a single rancid smell to contend with, perhaps she might have managed, even if the slime still clung to her face, but instead it was a veritable smorgasbord of aromas that would make even the most hardened gutter-rat feel queasy.

“I strongly agree.”

They trudged on through the back alleys, the mongrel all too confident at fitting in, Harmony horrified that she was so good a match for the people who would usually dwell here. Eventually they came upon a water barrel tucked against a wall, gathering the rain from the broken gutter above. It wasn’t a bath, but it was a start. Harmony set to work with gusto while the maid kept watch.

The minutes ticked by, with Harmony getting no closer to clean and the risk of discovery ever mounting. The rat-maid glanced back at Harmony using her nails to pry off some particularly resilient smudges where they’d hardened, “When you’re done, we need to get you off the streets.”

Harmony didn’t bother to look up. “That’s where our opinions begin to differ.”

The maid froze for a moment, her ears swiveling beneath her hood. Searching for any hint of trouble. “You can’t be wandering around in full view of everyone.”

“Why not?” Harmony shrugged, cracking off more caked filth from her back that she then turned her attention to. “Who knows me?”

All of the splashing was almost certain to have drawn attention by now, even if nobody had elected to wander into a dark alleyway to investigate just yet. Self-preservation instincts in the

peasantry of Covotana were well ingrained. “My instructions were to see you to safety, and that is what I intend to do.”

“How? Are you going to pick me up and carry me?” Harmony snorted, then snorted again, and again, trying to dislodge whatever awful thing was still stuck in her nose. She cupped water up to her face, but before trying to get it up there, she added, “And who, precisely was giving you these instructions?”

As the peasant gave not a word of answer, clearly vibrating on the very edge of fleeing from the whole mess, Harmony eased back down. “I’ll tell you what, if you lead me to the Anatra estate, I’ll be happy to get out of sight there.”

The rat-maid groaned. “That’s halfway across town. All open squares and bridges. We’ll be seen. There are patrols.”

“What of it?”

“They’ll catch us and kill us is what.”

“Why would they? Are they rampaging about murdering every man woman and child in the streets? I hardly think that the Agrantine are so foolish as to try and enforce a curfew on this city.” She wrung out her hair, and the stream of water was brown.

“They’ll question us, they’ll want to know why we are out so late.”

Harmony glanced up at the fading stars. “I believe it’s actually early, by now.”

When she glanced back to the maid, she realized she’d made some misstep. The girl’s fists were clenched. She was staring out from under her hood with unbridled aggression. Harmony had never seen her so furious, even when they were bullying her into revealing her master’s location.

“This. This is why we’ll get caught. Because you think this is a game. You think you can score points talking to someone, and if you score enough you win. All you parasites are the same. You don’t live in the real world.” She closed the distance between them and grabbed Harmony by the front of her shirt, dragging her nose to snout. “In the real world, you talk back to a soldier like that, and they kill you, and that’s if you’re lucky. Pretty girls like you won’t get lucky.”

“You think that I can’t bluff my way past a few...”

The rat-girl snapped. “They’ll kill you before you get the first word out. You couldn’t get out of a hole in the ground without help. You’re a stuck-up princess with no more sense than any of

the other brats I've had to pick up after for my whole life. This isn't a game. You will die. And I'm not letting you kill me too."

"Then go your own way!" Harmony swept her hands up, knocking herself free of the maid's grasp, then back over her scalp, freeing her vision of the dark tangles that had plagued it. "I'll see myself across town."

"You will die!" It came out in a sob. "I've killed to save you. And you're just going to throw it away?"

"If I die, then I die." She was still too exhausted to muster any real anger. "I'd rather die than cower like a rat in an alley."

In the face of such apathy, the rat-girl couldn't even muster up any real wrath. She switched to an almost coddling tone. "Come with me. We will hide, then when the streets are full and busy, I will take you."

"Will you?" Harmony's eyes narrowed. "Or is this just a ploy to have me do as you say?"

With a sigh, the maid took her arm. "I will."

Which was when the sword-saint flipped open the panel of his storm-lantern and shone it in their faces. Both women froze in place. The rat-girl was between Harmony and the guard, the only reason her sword was hidden from view. So long as they did not move, there would be no reason for the guard to draw arms. They were blind for a long dreadful moment, then the familiar black robes and bald pate came into view.

He said something in Agrantine, but in response to their flinching stares, he switched tactic. "Why here?"

All the lies she planned to tell died upon Harmony's tongue. Her mind was more numb than her body. It had robbed her of her dexterity before, and now it seemed even the speed of her mind had slowed to a crawl. The maid had to come to her rescue once more.

"Walking home. Late night. Cleaning."

What little of Harmony that was exposed to the man was soaking wet, and those parts that hadn't been slick with rainwater still looked filthy. It was a good lie. Vaguely plausible.

"Silence, mongrel," he snapped. Eyes locked on Harmony alone.

If the Agrantine considered Espher's dalliances with the spirits of the dead to be blasphemous, she could only imagine their treatment of the beast-folk. They were beneath contempt.

She could use that ignorance.

“Out now.” He beckoned them forward.

They moved slowly, together, in a lopsided formation. Keeping her sword masked from view. There was no hope in a straight fight, but there were two of them to the one saint, and exhausted as Harmony was, she had strength enough for a single stab into a turned back. If the opportunity arose.

Out in the street proper, Harmony felt properly exposed. The gentle breeze caught on her damp skin and set her shivering. For all that the weather was always fair in Espher, this was still the winter, and she was in no way dressed for it. Her cloak was long gone, somewhere beneath the street. She couldn't even guess at when she'd lost it down in the blinding darkness.

“Apart.” He gestured to either side of the alleyway. “Show hands.”

Harmony raised her hands quickly enough, but neither woman moved apart. Even the pounding of adrenaline wasn't enough now to get her body moving properly. She was watching the whole thing as though it were a play. Like she was floating just behind herself. Operating her body like a puppeteer. She hissed to the maid, “Same as the last one.”

The rat-girl's eyes flicked to her, but it was so brief that even the scouring stare of the saint's gaze was not sufficient. Her nose bobbed a quarter inch. It was probably a nod.

“Apart!”

They sprang to either side of the saint, Harmony's sword hissing out from its sheath, the lantern-light playing over the shining length of it, catching the saint's eye, spinning him to track it as he reached for his own sword.

Harmony lunged. On the draw, the saint parried, swerving her off course before snapping his blade back down towards her on the diagonal. She managed to deflect the counter-slash, but it rang off the hilt and chipped away some of the gilt.

Her arm was jarred up to the elbow, aching even through the numbness. As the saint brought his sword back around for another strike, she had no hope of catching it. This was the ultimate end of all her reserves and training. Pushed past her limit, she was going to be cut down in the street.

The saint only had eyes for her. Which was why he did not notice the rat-girl circling behind him or making her leap up onto his back. She wasn't all that much smaller than the average

woman, for all her rodent qualities. He might have been well muscled, even for a soldier, but it was enough to rock him. To spoil his swipe.

He reached back and grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, even as she stabbed him and bit at his nape. If she'd struck on the first leap, perhaps she could have taken him down, but now she was just blunting her little knife on his shoulder blades. With one hard tug, he dislodged her and flung her down to bounce off the cobbles.

Harmony's sword was buried to the hilt in his chest by the time he was done, and her shoulder was wedged under his arm to keep him from swinging his sword around with any force.

The expression on his face was one of puzzlement more than pain. He looked down at where metal met robes and then back up again. Like it was an illusionist's trick and he was trying to see how it had been done. As blood bubbled up onto his lips, Harmony reached up and pressed her hand over them. She could feel the wetness and the heat of it on her palm, but she did not release him.

This was not a game, as the rat-girl had said. Uncovered, he might cry out or scream and bring the whole city down on them. If she had struck true and punctured heart and lung, he would not be able to speak, but she had no way of knowing if she'd struck true. Not in the awkward reality of a street brawl. She still had hope, but she was not so foolish as to rely on it when she had other means at her disposal.

It was fine, really. She had endured so much worse than a little spittle and blood this night. Nothing in her lifetime would match that grotesquery. This felt positively pleasant by comparison.

She lowered the saint gently to the street, drawing her sword out as they went, checked one last time for breath, then sliced his throat for good measure.

Only with all of that done did she finally turn to the tangle of rags that had been her guide. It dawned on her now, as she crept closer, that she had not even bothered to learn the girl's name.

"Are you all right?"

No answer was forthcoming.

Harmony crouched down over the mongrel and touched gently on what she hoped was a back. "Are you hurt?"

It was a stupid question. Nobody was flung bodily into the civilized version of a big pile of rocks without a little pain. Her real question, which she didn't really want to say out loud, was, "Are you dead?"

Retrieving the saint's lantern, she shone light down upon the maid, making sense of the tangled limbs and lumps. Here was a leg, here the other, turned the opposite way, the tail curled here, and that meant that beneath this piece of dyed sackcloth would be the head. She uncovered the maid's face.

The beady black eyes had changed in quality. Before they shone by the torchlight. Now they looked dull, almost dry. Her malformed mouth hung open. The tip of her tongue dangled on a thread of tissue where her huge incisors had snipped it. When Harmony placed a hand in front of her snout, there was no breath to be felt.

All the questions left unanswered burned in Harmony's mind, but there was no time to weep over what was lost when there was still so much to lose. This woman had tried to kill her, had killed to save her, had died in a fight for her life. And she didn't know how to feel about her passing, except for the selfish wave of hopelessness that she would now have to navigate the city without a guide.

The plan was unchanged. Find shelter until morning. Blend into the crowd. Sneak into the Anatra estate. Find Kagan. Prove Orsina was alive.

Finding shelter in this part of the city was something of a problem. Even if her vague aroma of the chamber pot matched with what she'd come to expect of the common man, her clothes were entirely too well made for her to blend in here. With some trepidation, and no small amount of disgust with herself, Harmony untangled the maid's cloak from about her and swung it around her own shoulders. It was still warm, too warm in the places where blood had soaked into it. At least the extra stains would add to her credibility.

Dressed like a peasant and smelling like a peasant, she set off again, her sword handily concealed by the ragged cape and her face shrouded by the hood. Yet beneath that shroud, her mind was gone. If she could just sleep for a little while, she'd be able to think, she'd be able to get out of this situation with a dazzling turn of wit. It took her a solid minute of walking before she realized that she was strolling down a main street, just begging for another patrol to find her. Wandering away from where one of their number lay dead. Idiot.

She stumble-ran her way to the side of the street, looking for another handy alleyway, but it seemed that real estate was at too much of a premium here among the shopfronts for even an inch to be given up. Buildings pressed into one another as though they were lovers in an embrace. Drunken lovers staggering home, given the odd angles at which they intersected.

In the twilight hours before the sun rose over the caldera's rim, while night's chill still clung, it became harder to see with the same sharp distinction as she had before. The distant light of a lantern would have been a stark warning to her before, yet now, it took time for her to parse. Long enough for the patrolling figure to sight her, if they had turned her way. But in this light, at this distance, would they think anything of it? Or believe her to be their companion? She decided swiftly that she had no intention of finding out. There may have been no alleyway in which to hide from sight, but this was Covotana, city of a thousand fountains. It took but a moment of courage to stride back out into the middle of the street and on to the nearest square before she came upon one of the many humpback bridges reaching over the canals. Setting her lantern down with care and sliding its metal plates into place, returning the night's darkness, she bundled up the rat-maid's cloak to serve as a cushion. Thus returned to only the light of the distant stars, she stepped to the side of the bridge and swung herself down with a hand hooked in the overflow drain. If it were summer, there would have been stone for her to set her feet upon, but with the rains of winter, the canals were swollen. She plunged directly into the fresh flowing water and remembered with horror all that she had endured at the hands of mere water in the past few hours.

Yet this shimmering flow seemed to hold none of the malice of that underground. It tugged at her, drifting her along beneath the bridge before she could catch hold on crenellated stonework once more. It was cold, but that cold brought back sensation as much as it numbed it. Startling Harmony awake, setting her mind turning, at least a little. She would be invisible beneath this bridge to the patrols. If it wasn't almost certain to drown her the moment she lost her grip on the waking world, she'd have been tempted to hide out down here until it was safe.

The city was eerie in the grim light of dawn. There were some distant sounds of activity, but the streets that Harmony had never seen devoid of swarming crowds were still. The occupation of Covotana had stilled her. She languished in silence.

She counted, for want of something better to do, as the steady flow of water stripped the filth of the sewers away. Returning it from whence it came.

Strength had almost departed entirely by the time she hauled her way back up out of the canal, but at last, she escaped it and found an alleyway, enclosed by the reaching of upper floors towards one another. Pitch black if not for her borrowed lantern. All the refuse and detritus of a busy city had been pushed away so that it was hidden from sight. A shattered wagon, wheels long departed, formed an angled wedge, blocking further progress. Beneath it were scraps and rags, the kind of filth that Harmony would have been disgusted to see on a normal day. Now they seemed to be the most comfortable bed that she had ever come across.

Crawling beneath it, she untangled the sword and sheath from her belt and curled up around them. Was this place fit for royalty? Most certainly not. Could any part of Harmony be brought to care? That was also a firm no.