

Fall of the Blade
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Harmony had dawdled entirely too long waiting for her pet peasant to come back from classes before finally accepting that the girl had slipped loose of her apron strings. It had pained Artemio to drag his sister away from the House when her heart so obviously lay within its walls, but there were more pressing matters to attend to than some stranger who happenstance had foisted upon them. No matter what affection they might have held for that stranger.

There was a suite set aside for him in the palace now, where he meant to spend his nights until such time as the investigation was concluded. His connection to the inquisition was now known by all and sundry, and pretending not to be under the wings of the twin kings was liable to make him look a fool. He needed their authority to do his work, and he needed to be seen openly in their favour if he wanted their allies to consider him trustworthy. So he and Harmony travelled by carriage with a chest of clothes and belongings apiece and he hoped despite all evidence to the contrary that he might find some time before the year's end to actually do a little bit of studying and graduate.

She would not speak to him. He had delayed almost the entire day so that she might say goodbyes to her little project, and he could not afford any more time if they meant to be settled by nightfall. Already so much of the work that the day could have held had slipped through his fingers, and it was only the comforting weight of his invitation to come dine with Ambassador Modesta at luncheon tomorrow that kept him from entirely losing his temper.

It had been a short missive, but one laden with meaning. It seemed that their mutual friend had suggested a meeting sooner rather than later would be to their mutual advantage. As though he did not have much time left for lunches. How the queen might have known that the hammer was about to fall, Artemio could not say, but he was inclined to believe her word, given what he knew of her.

All of which meant that they needed to be relocated and settled in to more secure accommodations as swiftly as possible, whether Harmony intended to sulk the whole way or not.

Between them on the carriage seat was the second point of contention between them; an entirely too well-fed rodent in a storm-lantern that now seemed much too small a cage. Given nothing to do, and all day to do it in, the rat had taken to eating as much as it possibly could, and since Artemio had been unable to discover the correct feeding schedule for rats among the library books, he had been forced to continue providing food each day when it seemed that supplies had been depleted, working on the assumption that the beast would stop eating when it was full. This had been an error.

At first Harmony had insisted that she would not even look at the rat, but when they rounded a corner and it slid into her hip, her opinion on the matter rapidly changed to squeals of disgust, followed by a very fixed stare at the creature, as though it had deliberately crept over and nudged her.

The remainder of the trip was made in a furious silence, and they departed to their new quarters amidst a flurry of servants with all haste, barely even troubling to nod to all the courtiers who had suddenly developed an interest in them after years of behaving as though the pair were invisible. Ever were there more pressing matters to attend to.

They took their dinner in their chambers, parted ways early in the evening and Artemio settled in to read more of his predecessors final written words with a growing sense of unease. He had to fight the urge to barricade the door, he had turned the key in the lock, but that had done previous victims no good. In the end his rationality and fear warred with one another until he wedged a chair under the doorhandle and turned in.

The fire had burned down low, and the light was dim and red on the crossbeams above the bed as he stared up into impending insomnia. His grandfather was set at the foot of the bed to watch over him, he had laid all the plans that he could for his own survival through the night, yet still this did little to ease him into sleep. Normally a brief interlude with his good friend wine would have sent him off into his slumber, but tonight he did not dare lest it make him sluggish. Would every night be like this from now on? Just waiting for some impossible death to be visited upon him when he least expected it, or worse yet, would it become so normal that he could sleep through it, like the old soldiers tales of men who dozed through a battle. He could not say which would be worse.

Yet for all of his fretting and tossing and turning beneath the rather fine quilted blanket, at some point sleep did come. He could not pinpoint the moment that the darkness before his eyes became the darkness beneath his eyelids, nor the moment that the jumble of his fearful thoughts became haunted and hunted dreams, but nonetheless, he did fade away.

Pain lanced through him before his eyes were open. It was a shallow cut on the outside of his arm, barely a graze through night-clothes and skin, but it brought him out of his stupor faster than any amount of shouting could have. With consciousness came a flood of knowledge. Bisnonno Fiore was watching over all, relaying all he saw to Artemio with the distance and calm that only the grave could grant a watcher.

Still, it was not as clear or easy to understand in the moment when it was all dumped directly into his brain. Things seemed distant and misshapen, like they were being viewed through a warped looking glass. Faded and grey in the dim light of burnt down embers. His body lying still and defenceless on the bed looked tiny. The rag cowed figures gathered all around him with hooked knives loomed larger than life. Pillars of doom and darkness hanging over him. The only one in the image who looked even vaguely true to life was Harmony. Her sword turning what should have been a killing strike against him into the scrape he'd felt.

"Wake up, you're being murdered in your sleep!" At least the late hour had done nothing to dampen her usual wit.

Six of them against two Volpes. He'd take those odds any day.

With a pulse, Artemio set Fiore to his task, flinging his own sword across the room into his waiting hand. It was still sheathed, but it served to turn aside another hacking blow of a knife as Harmony drove the first assailant off him. All of them had knives not swords, but it was only for simplicities sake that he'd even call them knives. One wielded something like a meat cleaver. Another some hooked tool Artemio thought he'd seen in a tanner's yard. These were not warriors or assassins or anything of the sort. They were not trained for combat.

He proved it with a deft twist of his wrist sending his second assailant's hook soaring across the room. There were feathers on the back of the hand that his cross-stroke severed.

As he rose to his feet and the blanket fell away, he saw Harmony cut down the one who'd drawn his blood, and froze in his tracks for but a moment. It was a girl. Human as him. There was no magic at work here. No explosive or dragon-beast or any of the wild theories that he'd entertained. They were just people. People who committed such grievous butchery that the victims could no longer be recognised as anything but meat.

The courage of their conviction could not be questioned though. Even seeing themselves outmatched they still came on. One darting in at Harmony's back and two leaping right onto Artemio, meaning to bear him down with their own weight while a third prepared a killing strike. Were he just a man, it would have done for him. But he was more.

"Behind you!"

Flames leapt along the length of his blade as he crossed it over his body. Searing into the toad-faced woman with a reeking acrid stench that caught in his throat. The other caught a lance of flame expelled from his other hand in his throat and fell without a sound to the bloodstained rug beneath the bed.

With a heave the toad-girl's body tumbled into the path of his last assailant, knocking their wild swing wide to wedge into the bedframe. The flames he'd set in her gut roared out to consume her and scorch at that man too. The smell was overwhelming, and Artemio found he had to scramble back to avoid the black cloud of it billowing up. With a twist of his mind, he redirected the attentions of the Forge-Spirit from the consumption of flesh to the fireplace, setting the near-dead charcoal of the night's logs ablaze once more and flooding the room with light.

Harmony had made swift work of her own foe, and now the two of them turned on the last of the six. A hunched figure that seemed less interested in fighting them, and more interested in tearing everything from the shelves of their quarters, digging through cupboards, whipping aside discarded clothes, and generally making as much of a mess as was possible. The curiously familiar form was so intent upon her task that she did not seem to have noticed that the battle had been fought and lost by her allies in the time it took her to dig through some wardrobes. The one that poor Harmony had been lurking in all night notwithstanding.

In that moment, Artemio's mind tore back through the events before he had been stirred from his slumber. The servant's passage that had been opened behind the grand tapestry by the fireplace. The cupboard hanging open where Harmony had leapt into action with all haste. Bisnonno Fiore's inaction as he saw servants going about their business in the night, as a king might expect them to. Out of sight out of mind. Passing invisibly through a world of their betters. All of this time, the mystery of the murders had been so simple, and they had all been so blind to it.

Artemio released his shades and sheathed his sword. "You're not going to find the rat in there."

The maid froze in place, looking more like a cornered rat than she ever had before. Her shoulders still hunched up, the tip of her tail barely protruding beneath the rags in which she'd clad herself; a distinct step down from the usual finery she spent her ill-gotten gains on.

She turned to face him, knife still in hand, and Artemio vaguely recalled some advice regarding cornering a rat that one of his father's retainers had shared. So he showed his own empty palms to her with a smile. "You aren't going to find her scurrying around this place. I'm not a fool to leave my leverage in

plain sight. If you had any sense you would already know this. You can feel your bond-mate just as surely as I can smell burnt meat. Just because you don't want to believe what your senses tell you, it doesn't mean anything will be different."

Harmony glanced back and forth between the maid and her brother. "You know her?"

"Yes, this is the treacherous little rat-maid I told you all about. The one with her fingers in all the pies and a dozen rich men paying for her scraps. The one who seemed quite incapable of finding anything out about the assassins plaguing our kingdom. I suppose we know why that is now..."

The maid's grip on the knife seemed to waver. "I told you to give up. I told you to quit. Why wouldn't you listen?"

Harmony piped up, "Because he's an arrogant prick?"

His head whipped around, and his mouth hung open. "Whose side are you on, dear sister?"

"Yours. She was entirely correct. You should have listened to the nice little assassin when she gave you the chance to quit." Harmony had not taken her eyes off the rat-maid this entire time. She still considered the girl a threat. Artemio should have too. For all that he knew, his predecessor's blood was on her fluffy little hands.

There was a heat in his voice when he put her to the question. "All of this time, you were working against me. All of this time you were right by my side. Why did you wait until tonight?"

"Orders was to do you tonight. Before, he thought you were just going to run in circles until you gave up. Thought you were like the other fools." When she saw Artemio's brows drawing down, she quickly added, "I warned them. I told them you weren't. They wouldn't listen to me."

Even after attempting his murder, she was still trying to protect his feelings. It was a curious little paradox.

"Orders from whom, exactly?" He saw her eyes dart from side to side, and let his hand come down to rest on the hilt of his sword. "And please bear in mind that your life is on the line at this moment, before you decide that you want to lie to me again."

Her whiskers twitched and her beady eyes darted and her whole body seemed to tremor with barely contained energy, but none of it mattered a jot. There was no way out for her, except through him. She dropped her knife. "The Last King."

"I am assuming that you are not referring to Demetrio Cerva when you use those words, but rather the mythical shade who consumes all living souls upon death?" Artemio could already feel his annoyance building into a headache behind his eyes. Why couldn't she just give him the name he needed.

She curled her lip up at him. "There's only one true king."

Artemio took a deep breath, and let his anger pass. This was the task that was allotted to him, to make sense of that which made none. It was hardly fitting for him to be enraged now that he was finally drawing out some answers. He carefully took his hand away from his sword and crossed his arms. "I've heard that before you know. It was a servant saying it then too. I didn't quite make the connection to

some old fairy tale back then either. 'There is but one true king in this world, and his crown is made of bone.' Is that the one?"

"You know nothing." Rat-girl sneered once more. "Nothing of what the real world is like. Where you have to scabble and claw just to live. Sitting on your thrones. Wearing your finery. You don't know what its like when the Last King is the only one you'll ever see or know. But you will..."

He cut off that ramble before it could degenerate further. Whoever had been inflicting an ideology on these peasants had done a good job embedding the rhetoric. Even this fearful little mouse seemed to have the courage of a lion now she was speaking of her Last King. "I'm sure your excuses for butchering the people in your care while they sleep are very compelling, but perhaps we might turn our attention to more pressing matters. Who is this fairy tale spectre who commands you, and where shall I find him?"

She drew herself up to her full height, which wasn't much. And squared her shoulders, which were entirely too sloped for such a gesture of defiance. "The King is no story, he's real, and you'll never find him. I'll never betray the cause."

Artemio sighed. "Oh I do wish you hadn't said that."

For all of his posturing, Artemio didn't have much stomach for torture. That was why he glanced away just before the basket hilt of Harmony's rapier crashed into the rat-girl's back and drove her to her knees.

Harmony didn't have much in the way of evil in her, but the same temper that simmered away in all the Volpes was down there beneath her façade of kindness and ladylike manners. "Answer his questions, or you'll answer to me."

Rat girl's defiance didn't crumble under the blow. If anything it seemed to coalesce into something more solid than before. Her ratty little face tightened over her distended skull, and she looked more beast than man. "No. I won't."

She was a peasant born, made her living as a servant, spy and assassin. Pain was an old friend to her. Beatings and floggings and all of the rest. They would not get her to talk by hitting her. No matter how much the wrath in Artemio's gut at her betrayal bayed for her blood.

In one motion, the rat-girl scooped up her knife and thrust it at Harmony's guts. They'd thought her broken and finished. They were wrong. Neither twin had time to react.

Fiore was another matter.

The dead king's spectre roared into being between his granddaughter and the jumped up peasant that dared raise a hand against her. Ice crusted the blade and it shattered on contact with Harmony's dress-laces.

The force of the stab still carried through and doubled Harmony over, but there was no sharp edge to cut into her now. It was little more than a pointed punch that drove her dinner up her throat and out to spatter down the rat-girl's back. Good thing she was wearing rags already.

Artemio's bare heel stomped down onto the maid's tail, and he felt his own stomach lurch at the rubbery sensation of it. Her cry of pain let him know he still had her attention. Harmony took only a moment to finish spitting bile before she was on the maid, riding her down to the floorboards and beating at her with her empty hands. Slaps as often as punches. No skill or training, just anger.

The broken knife hilt chattered across the floor and Artemio called a halt. "Enough."

Harmony didn't really want to stop, judging by the way her fists were still clenched and droll was still oozing down her chin. "She tried to kill me."

"I've also been on the receiving end of that particular delight, as you might recall." Artemio helped her back to her feet. "You are not special."

"Rude." She gave the maid one last kick for good measure, but it wasn't clear which of them the words were directed at.

Artemio went to the bed and crouched down to retrieve the storm lantern from its place beneath where his head had lain but minutes before. "You've already shown that your loyalty to the cause is less than your feelings for this rodent. Turning your back on your little co-conspirators to seek her out."

He set the lantern down on the table and with a sigh, put his finger over the slit for ventilation. "Now you will talk, and fast."

Rat-girl tried to spring forward only to meet Harmony's boot. Artemio watched with no small amount of distaste as Harmony wrapped an arm around the mongrel's neck and hauled her up until her twitching nose was level with the table top.

Within its cage, the rodent was flinging itself against the glass, trying to get back to its bond-mate. It may not have understand the fear that was passing to it through their connection, but it experienced it all the same, it grew ever more frantic as the air within its trap began to sour. Scrabbling at the glass it had no hope of breaking.

It was hard not to feel pity for the little beast, even if it was vermin. It had not chosen to have its very life bound to the fate of some scurrilous scullery maid. All that it wanted from life was to eat and sleep and make more little rats. Artemio couldn't help but feel a pang of envy for the simplicity of it.

Tears were pooling around the rat girl's bruised eyes, but her quivering snout was set in place. "I won't."

He dragged a seat over with his foot and then settled into it with a groan. Leaping up from sleeping like that, he felt as though he'd sprained every muscle in his body. He had spent a good year or two of his life early in feeding shades during his training. It was small wonder he was feeling the pangs of age so soon. "Then you will watch your little friend here expire."

Rat-maid sobbed and raged. Her body shook and she strained against Harmony's arms hopelessly. "You're a monster. You're all monsters. All you blue-blooded bastards, sat on top of the heap just because your great granddaddy killed folks quicker than they could kill him. Your bred for evil. The whole lot of you."

"Perhaps you are correct, but none of that matters to little Daria here. She has no sway in the matter, her world is much smaller and it is constructed entirely of inevitabilities."

The minutes ticked by. The little rat's air growing denser and denser with the poison of her own lungs. The frantic scrabbling slowed to a fumble now and then. Her attention seemed to be wavering. As for the girl, her skin showed pale between the patches of fur. She seemed to wither and shrink in Harmony's arms.

Across the room, the door to the servants passages still hung open. At any moment another of the assassins might be coming. Perhaps a tide of them so overwhelming that two young Volpes would be pressed beyond their limits.

Artemio tried to calculate the sheer number of servants in the palace, and how many of them would be loyal to the crown. He had never had to consider the loyalty of servants before, it had always seemed as certain as the rising sun. By all means they might have spied for a stipend, but escalating to violence against their betters was so unthinkable that it drew him up short. The court heaved with nobles and courtiers, yet each of them had a staff of their own. Even the meanest household held at least a butler and maid, and the more members of the family there were, the more help they required. There were at least twice the servants to nobles in the palace alone. If only a half of them were caught up in this Last King's uprising, then Covotana would fall.

Beyond the palace walls, the scales tipped ever more in the peasantry's favour. It did not matter that they had no swords or armour when there were a hundred of them for each fighting man. The guards and men at arms were not drawn from noble stock either, which way would their loyalty swing? Beyond the city gates, the numbers turned ever against the ruling class. If this conspiracy had root across all of Espher, then the kingdom was already lost.

His stomach lurched once more as he recalled the number of nobles murdered in their country estates, his own mother among them. This uprising was not contained, except by the will of whoever led it. The Last King.

His finger hurt where it was pressed over the ventilation slit, but he did not dare move it an inch, lest it give the rat some air and the girl some hope. He looked to the dying servant and sighed. "Who is the Last King? Where do I find him?"

She spat at him but she was so bereft of life that it came out as little more than a trickle down her own lower lip.

"This can all end, all you need do is answer my questions."

She wheezed, "Fuck you."

Artemio probably should have expected such coarse language from a creature like her, but he was still startled to hear that word spoken aloud by any lady. No matter how low her birth. Harmony drove a punch into the maid's kidneys, but she was so far gone, Artemio wasn't certain that she had even felt it.

This wasn't working.

He'd felt certain he had the measure of this girl. But then, he'd been certain he had her measure before. She might have been easy to startle, but she was resolute. She'd rather die than give up her master, and she was too far gone now to even fear that death.

With a jerk, he took his hand off the lantern, and watched as life flooded back into both rat and girl in synchronisation. Even through her daze, Artemio could see the girl smirking. She thought that this was a victory. That he would not dare to kill her. "This is taking too long. I am losing my patience."

Inside the lantern fresh air had brought the rat back from the brink and it was mewling pitifully to its partner. Tears were matting the maid's russet furred cheeks, but as life flowed back through her, Artemio could see the spark of rebellion in her eyes reignite. She was resolute enough to watch a slow death coming. Now he had to resort to a short sharp shock.

He turned to the rat in its cage, struggling to press against the glass and get close to its beloved mistress, and he lit a fire.

The Forge Spirit wanted to burn hotter, it wanted to scorch every hair away from the rat in the lantern and consume the flesh and leave nothing but blackened bones behind, but Artemio held it at bay. He smelled the popped corn smell as hair began to burn, heard the squeals of distress turn to fear and agony. The maid cried out too. Desperate and struggling with all her strangulated strength against Harmony. She was too weak, too spent, and too outclassed. Even when she tried to bite into Harmony's arm, the girl just twisted it under the maid's chin out of reach. "Stop it! Stop! Please."

The fire shone bright in the dim room. Blinding bright to the maid's eyes. Her whole world had narrowed down to the rat in the lantern, and Artemio's voice. "Tell me what I need to know."

She still couldn't look away from the rat and the flame. "I don't know! I don't know who he is. Please."

Artemio sighed. He was already exhausted from his fitful night of sleep and his mid-night awakening. The drain on his spirit of keeping the Forge fire in check was beginning to get him down. "I do not believe that will be sufficient."

"I can take you to him." The maid babbled as her hair began to smoke. "He's under the city, I know the way. Just stop it!"

Harmony rolled her eyes. "Sounds like a trap."

"It certainly does." Artemio nodded.

"It isn't! I wouldn't! I'm begging you. Please!"

He snapped the fire off with a final push of his will. The rat was scorched and wet looking on the side that had been exposed, and Artemio could not help but to feel pity for it, but if he had to be the very monster that this assassin accused him of to survive then he would shed no tears for dead vermin.

Rising to his feet, Artemio reached out a hand. The maid tried to take it before he leaned past her to help Harmony back to her feet. To the maid, he merely said, "You will lead us directly to your Last King, and you will explain to me how you answer to a man that you do not know the identity of as we go."