

1 - The Chained Dreamer
Caldo, Regola Dei Cervia 112

Fire scorched her skin. Wind whipped by so fast it tore her hair from its roots. The chill of the grave clawed its way up into the bones of her legs, edging higher and higher with each passing moment. She was drowning at the bottom of a deep, dark pool, and she was infected with every disease she had ever read about.

Poison coursed through her veins in place of blood. Blood wept from a thousand cuts on her skin. Each opening, another rough edge for the wind to tug at, for the flames to crisp and sear.

She would have screamed if she was not choking on the pondweed dragged down her throat by the influx of stagnant water. She would have wept if her eyes were not shriveled to nothing by the flames.

Still, she could not die.

She could want to. She could long for it with every part of her being, but she could not die.

The flames that seared her filled her up with burning life. The chill of the grave served only to temper them. The water and the wind switched places again and again, flickering back and forth so she was in perpetual torment but could not actually drown. There was no end. For every poison an agonizing poultice was applied to draw it out.

It was not as though she'd had no warning. From the very beginning she had known that tragedy was the fate of any who dabbled with the dead. From her birth mother's haunted stares into the dark of night. From Mother Vinegar's softness when she spoke of the shades, with no edge to her razor tongue at all. Every day in the House of Seven Shadows it had been drummed into them. To invite a shade inside you was to court disaster. All their teachings were meant to mitigate that danger. To clip your pet shade's wings so they could not soar too high or grow too strong. To layer laws and rules and restrictions on even the smallest trade of life for power.

They had all been so afraid the shades would drink their fill and leave them dead. They had all warned her it could happen to her, that it was the very worst thing that could happen to her, that she might spend every moment of her life in one fell swoop if she ever let go of control for even an instant.

Nobody had warned her about this. They had all warned her that she could die; not one had warned her that she would live.

Strength and life flooded her as swiftly as her shades tore it away. But every time she reached for that bond to restore herself, it was snatched away from her groping fingers by the storm of chaos. The shades fought and scrabbled for pieces of her spirit like rabid dogs, and she was both prize and battlefield. Even as they tore into her, more life flooded in. Even as they grew more and more powerful, more and more capable of rending her apart, she fed them.

Her body, they could not touch. They were not creatures of flesh and blood. Her mind, though, it was in ruins. No mind was built to withstand that kind of pain, that kind of damage. Death was meant to stop it before it got this bad. Why wouldn't death come?

The first time she had fallen into a fugue like this, it had been only her and one shade battling for dominance. She had lost months, years of her life as Ginny Greenteeth had fought her for control of her body. Every scratch, she had bled minutes. Now she lost decades with every brutal bite.

All the memories she had bought so dearly in the House of Seven Shadows, all the rules and laws and tricks that shades might pull. All the ways she could use them and not be used in return, they burned. Offered up on the sacrificial pyre as she tried desperately to cling to the parts that were still her. Her name. What was her name? She could remember a girl, pressing a soft kiss to her chapped lips. She could remember a man, more serpent than human. The comfort in his arms. The only one she had not forgotten any part of was Mother Vinegar, and that was because the old witch was here with her now, inside her, fighting like all the rest. Fighting back against all the rest to save her, even as the shade drank deep of her to fuel its fighting and poisoned her with every attempt.

Distantly she was aware of her body. It should have been still. Immobile and useless as all the forces that might have animated it clashed here inside her. Yet she could feel it moving. Rocking rhythmically as it was carried off somewhere. Was she going home? Were they taking her somewhere she could be safe? Somewhere she could heal? If she could just end this conflict,

assert control once more, then she would know, but she could not. Even if her mind was not so beaten and bruised that mere simple speech eluded her, she would not have had the will.

Until this battle ended, she was trapped here. Until the dragon and the swamp monster and the rebel and the old witch stopped fighting for mastery, they were all lost. If she could just speak to them, she could make them understand, but each time she tried, her words were drowned out. Drowned literally by the weight of water rushing down into her. Scorched from her throat as fire tried to burn its way up through a body that was never meant to breathe flames. Strangled back by the razor-edged winds of the rebel's blades pressed against her. Frozen by the grave chill of the dead that inhabited her living flesh.

If she could remember her name, she would be able to find her way back to herself. Back to her body, to her life. She'd be able to escape from this maelstrom of pain and terror. She could be herself again, instead of prize or battlefield or victim. All she had to do was remember.

Why couldn't she remember?

Why wouldn't they just let her die?

Layer after layer of who she was peeled away. The battle with the dragon-lords was long gone, her time in the House of Seven Shadows grew vaguer by the moment, and with each part of herself that she lost, more and more of the past peeked through. Not the parts that she clung to. Not the memories that were the pillars of her being. Things she had forgotten. Things she had chosen to forget, because remembering them was like reaching out to touch a pot boiling over the fire again and again.

The fire searing her now took her back to the fire that had seared her then. The wild dragon's flames licking over her back as she fled through the Selvaggia, catching on her clothes, clinging to her flesh, sticky fire eating in, burrowing deeper. Pain digging down to touch her bones. Agony she'd never known before.

This wasn't what she hid from. The scars on her body would never truly fade, the memory of the pain would forever haunt her, but this was not the memory that made her wake weeping in the night.

That came after, when the dragon caught up to her, when its mouth opened wide and those huge teeth closed behind her, and all that she knew was darkness. The forest, gone. Her life, gone. Nothing to lose, she had called out to the shade in the pool. It had leapt to her call. Suckling at her life.

Even this, she still remembered. She had no shame of it. Not truly. For all that Kagan had spoken of the ultimate evil of killing a dragon, she could never bring herself to regret saving her own life the only way she could.

It was the moment after that still haunted her. When the dragon began to die around her, when she felt it dying through senses no mortal was meant to possess. She felt the venom stop pumping, the blood slow, and the hearts still. She felt the soul leaving, and she reached out and snatched it.

There had been no accident that brought a second shade into her heart, just some twisted instinct to preserve a life being lost. A life she'd felt a momentary spark of guilt for taking through the tumult of her possession. She did not know if it was pity or some avarice she had not known she harbored, but when the soul of the dying dragon came into reach, she took it. Swallowed it down and made it hers, just as the shades now did to her.

Rational thought was lost to her again in the chaos. That brief glimpse of her darkest memories now washed away in the same flood that kept her from even a moment's rest. Time had lost all meaning early into the living conflagration. She could not have said if minutes, hours, or days had passed since she lost her hold over the shades.

Was this what madness felt like? Reason untethered from perception. Any sense of self lost in sensations that should not exist.

She was stripped back further, past her worst moment, past the man in the woods and the witch in her hut and the shade in her body, twisting her, remaking her in its image. Through bad memories and childhood and back. All the way back.

This was familiar. All of it. She had been through all of this before. The madness. The chaos. The soul-tearing swarm of shades trying to strip her life away. She knew this pain. She knew it, because this had all happened to her before.

Her very first breath had drawn them in. A whole world of the dead, desperately clinging to any trace of life. She was a beacon fire to them, and they had rushed into the hollow in her soul, one after another after another, filling her up, making her them. She remembered things she could have never known. She was every one of the dead for a few blissful moments of harmony, her empty head full of all their fading dreams, then it had all been dragged out of her. The leaden weight of a bag on her chest, the distant thrum of Mother Vinegar's voice.

She had suffered this before, and she had survived. She had grown, and she had learned, and she had gone on surviving. She had made it through this. So, she would make it through again. This was not the end for her. These were not her death-throes.

Though the shades still clawed at her, she no longer gave ground, she no longer sought the oblivion they drove her towards. The pain did not lessen, because it could not, no spirit was meant to suffer as hers did, but her tolerance for it grew.

Strength still flowed. It may have been snatched at by greedy shades, but it still touched her first, and now that she had a foundation to build upon, it gathered.

The parts of her that had survived were no longer being whittled away. The parts of her that she'd thought lost were just there on the other side of the storm. It burned her to reach for them. Bladed wind sliced at her. The crushing weight of water tried to hold her down. But she was both the prize and the battlefield, and they could not keep her cornered inside her own mind forever.

She had survived this before. She would survive this now. She would live. She would remember.

Kagan was the name of the dragon-lord she was bound to. His strength was what sustained her. His life was what kept her heart beating through all this pain.

Harmony was the girl who had pressed soft promises of a future to her lips. A future that was not pain and misery but hope for better.

Mother Vinegar was the old haggard woman who she rose to stand beside. Who she directed the flow of life into, so that newborn shade could match the strength of the ancient and wicked things that she had welcomed inside her and protect her spirit from their predation.

Her name was the last piece. The last stone to be set in the foundation, to make her whole, to make her real. She reached for the most fiercely guarded prize of the invasive shades, and they bore down on her with all their strength.

She pushed on through as they bit into her, teeth and claws, fire and ice, all the powers that they could bring to bear, they flung in her face, and she passed through. Not unscathed, never unscathed, but determined all the same. They had already done their worst to her. What more did she have to fear?

When she reached that hidden word, she did not even know it for what it was. The only sign that she had touched upon her goal was the sudden echoing silence of the shades as they braced for her counterstrike. Orsina. Her name was Orsina.

They came upon her in a flood, trying to claw the name back. She fell away from them, behind the protective poisons of Mother Vinegar, clinging to it with all she was. Dragging it with her from where it had been lost to this hidden safe place in her mind where her darkest secrets lay buried. She laid it down only once she could be certain it would lock into place.

Like the others, it became the foundation block on which she stood. It was from this solid ground that she could now fight back. It was from here that she would reclaim her mind, then her body, then her life.

Exhausted, battered, and torn to shreds, she turned to face the enemies within.

2 - Shadows of Agrant

Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

On the white walls of Covotana, black banners fluttered in the breeze. As though the whole city mourned.

As well the city should mourn. It was the heart of the Kingdom of Espher and infested with the soldiers of a foreign power. The banners bore the symbol of an eye surrounded by a starburst, all stitched in thread of gold. Yet for all that expense, they were poorly finished. As though the maker had no care for their hard work.

The great walls rimming the caldera the city was sunk into bore an abnormal load too. In the place of city guard stationed every ten feet, there was but a single man for each stretch of thirty. In other armies, Artemio would have taken this as a sign of weakness, that the Agrantine had overextended themselves, but he knew that it was not so. The one thing that Agrant was not lacking was bodies. They had drowned vassal states in corpses to take them. Laid down twenty of their own men to fell a single enemy soldier and considered it a low price to pay. He knew their history, and he knew who the men atop the walls were and the message they sent. They were not the common foot soldiers Agrant used so freely. They bore no shields, no spears, nothing but a single sword on their hip. The message of their placement was not a lack of bodies, but contempt for anyone who might attack. One sword-saint was worth more than three guardsmen.

Evening was already falling as the Espheran army came in sight of this desecration, and night was close when they stood beneath the flapping eyes, staring out from either side of the closed gates.

There had been no forced march back from the northern frontier. The men and the horses were not exhausted as they might have been, but they had been bearing their wounded with them, and more peasants had deserted to return to their own fields and furrows than might reasonably have been expected. There was no punishment for them, of course. Desertion after duty was done was hardly desertion at all. Still, their numbers had been depleted sorely by their clash with the Arazi and the gradual attrition of peace. They were, in essence, as weak as they were ever going to be, while the Agrantine showed no signs of a fight whatsoever.

The gates should have been flung open. The Agrantine should have come pouring out before the snaking line of troops on the roads could make up formations. They could easily break Espher's army in this moment, and that one defeat would be all that was required to take not only the city but the whole nation. The loyalty of the nobility was to the king, and if he lay dead upon his throne, then the ensuing civil war among what cousins the Cerva had produced would almost certainly leave the kingdom wide open to any further incursions the southerners brought to bear. This army, here and now, was the only unity that Agrant would face. All they had to do was prove their dominance and the exhausted soldiery would flee.

Yet they did not.

Artemio was not inclined to look a gift-horse in the mouth. The moment the change in décor had become apparent to his lieutenants, they had begun roaring their men into formation, but with battlefield swiftness, Artemio belayed their orders and redistributed the troops. No longer were they forming up on the road in one great block. Instead, they dispersed off the packed dirt and spread out into the plain around the city in their respective squads. They did not truly have the manpower to achieve the full encircling that Artemio demanded of them, not while so many were held back to establish a command base out of reach of arrowshot, but they deployed with all haste regardless.

So long as they were still on the field of battle, no lord or Shadebound would dare to back down or ignore an order for fear of being labeled a coward or traitor. Legacies had been broken over the barrel of history for far less. Artemio still had them for now, and so long as he had them, there was a way to reclaim the city.

There was dissent in the ranks. Arguments among nobles. Princes among men who felt their duty had been done but could not say as much without shame. They would not order their men at arms to do the work that was required. Digging latrines and fortifying positions was peasant work. They should send out riders to fetch back their vassals. They should not have been allowed to wander off to begin with. They should have been whipped from here to their home villages. It was a great deal of noise that Artemio had no patience for. They would not have long to entrench their position before Agrant made a move, and if they were caught unawares, it would be catastrophic. A siege was a slow operation, gradual, arduous, but the establishment of one was not. It had to be performed rapidly, and each moment he had to spend talking one of his own lords into doing the task assigned to them was a moment the enemy had to take them unawares.

“I am aware that your men are tired and wounded. We are all tired and wounded, and it will matter nothing to Agrant how we have wept for soft beds. If they are not encircled, then they shall receive supplies rendering all our efforts at siege craft moot. It will also allow them the opportunity to summon reinforcements. If your men are so hard-pressed as you insist, then such a summons would end in their deaths. Given the choice between hard labor for a few hours and perpetual annihilation, I should imagine that each and every man in your company shall abruptly sprout shovels and a working knowledge of fortification.” There was no time to stand still. Even as he was pestered, he had to walk the line, pointing and calling out where things had been missed. Gracing the competent with firm nods. It was the kind of work his father would have delighted in. Artemio would rather have been sitting alone in a quiet room with a book. Possibly a glass of wine.

The particular hanger-on hanging from his sleeve was an older noble, bald of pate and thick of gut, like so many of them were. Artemio thought he could hear a creak each time a thought tumbled down from beneath that bald pate to topple out the man’s mouth.

“Duke Volpe...”

Artemio cut him off with a raised hand. Brought the whole procession to a halt with it in fact. All the secretaries and batmen and miscellaneous lordlings with complaints slammed to a halt as his hand rose. “If the next words from your mouth are not obeisance then we shall have a quarrel on our hands, Lord Tartaruga. I would rather not quarrel with so charming a man.”

Flattery was so simple with men like this. Men who believed that by burden of birth they had been gifted with every virtue loved to hear them described. “You shall have my full compliance, of course.” Tartaruga wheedled on. “I was merely going to say that as my men bore the burden of the Arazi assault, might it not be kinder to offer them a position in defense of the command post where they are less likely to suffer immediate injury?”

“My lord, you have some of the finest men at arms in all of Espher, and I should be delighted to have their company once the cordon is established, but as of this moment, all hands must be upon the figurative deck.” He clapped the man on the shoulder and set off again.

From behind his back the old lord cracked a grin. “This is hardly the time for cards, Duke Volpe.”

Artemio was so tired he couldn’t quite muster a false laugh. “Very droll.”

Then away one man spun with another springing into place, trying to match the jovial smile still plastered on Artemio's face even though he felt only a few moments away from attempting to incinerate every man, woman, and ignorant wannabe strategist in reach.

“With regret, Duke Volpe, my men must depart the field. Our home is between here and your own domain to the south. We must drive off whoever the Agrantine left to holds our lands.”

Artemio's head buzzed through all the various lordlings between here and the Cut. Dark tan, dark hair cut short, blue eyes, unusual combination. Lady Toporagno, a bastard child recognized by the father when no heir was forthcoming. Tenuous hold on her estate. No wonder she felt the need to flee.

“With regret, Lady Toporagno, your forces must complete the task I have assigned to them.”

She puffed herself up as much as she could muster. “You would leave our homes in the hands of the Agrantine?”

If she meant to shame him in front of the other noble scions of Espher, she would have to try harder than that. Artemio had been enduring their sneering contempt for his entire life. If she thought he'd fold over a false moral quandary, she was soon to be disappointed. He spoke up so everyone could hear his answer. “If the Agrantine are wise, of which we have no guarantee, then they will be holding a passage south for reinforcements or retreat. In likelihood, such a passage must lead through both of our lands, yet for some reason you do not see me rushing homewards. Why do you suppose that might be?”

Because the Cut was not home to him. Because the Osservatore had ever felt like a prison. Because he'd sooner cede the whole thing to Agrant than have to look in the eyes of his father's loyal servants, knowing he had killed the man they swore their life to.

Toporagno missed every mark. “Because you have a duty to lead this army to victory. I have no such obligation.”

“You have a duty to be led,” he snapped, sounding every bit as harsh a taskmaster as the old duke had been. Perhaps this was his true inheritance. An outlet for all of his anger. “Listen carefully to me, my lady, for it is not often that I trouble myself to explain my thinking to those who should be obedient without question. The only reason the column south must be held is because of the Agrantine in the heart of Espher. Without them, there is no reason for any foreign soldier to be upon our soil. We could turn from this city, head south, close off that passage, and strangle them of reinforcement, but in so doing we would leave the invaders time to sink roots. If

we remain, we might pluck the whole putrid weed from the ground in one fell swoop. Leaving the root to the south to wither without purpose.”

She made one last-ditch appeal to the nobility of his spirit, clearly not understanding that he had none to speak of. “My men have wives and children...”

He cut her off. “Who will remain as alive or dead as they already are now, regardless of when you return home. If it is of any consolation, I do not believe the Agrantine are prone to harming the peasantry of those nations they invade. It would be akin to stealing a house and then tearing up all the floorboards.”

So dismissed, she fell back and a secretary elbowed his way into her place, much to the chagrin of the high lords and ladies.

“Duke Volpe, I need to speak with you.”

Artemio cast a glance around him. “In this, you are not unique.”

“It is about your sister, my lord.”

“Of course it is. Because planning a siege cordon at the drop of a hat was not enough.” He stopped where he stood and pinched at the bridge of his nose. “What has she done now?”

“She is at the command post, making... suggestions.”

He had braced himself for the worst, expecting her to have attempted to mount the walls on her own, but this news was somehow even more troubling. It was bad enough that every lordling from here to the steppes had their own opinion on how the invasion should be handled. To have division showing within his own family was tantamount to admitting that he had no idea what he was doing. She spoke with some measure of his authority. Her suggestions would be thought to have flowed from him, and if they contradicted his actual orders, then chaos would most assuredly reign.

He called out for a horse then turned to the gathered high and mighty of Espher. “I will return as soon as possible, until then you must continue to establish the cordon line. I am certain that you are up to this task, and I shall not forget your loyal service.”

There was little room for argument. Particularly because the window in which to mount one was so brief. Truth be told, none of them could have had any pressing matter that Artemio needed to attend to, otherwise one of his innumerable secretaries or lieutenants would have brought the news to him. This was just the usual nonsense of court—large heads that needed propping up.

He rode alongside his soldiers as close to a gallop as he dared over the mud-churned field. The horse beneath him already had the beginning of a limp from so long on the road. Wouldn't it be a fitting end for him to die here between battles because of a fall. If death were anything like sleep, he might have wished for it at about that moment. Rest seemed like a distant relative that he had not heard much from in the past few years.

It was not difficult to find Harmony. It never had been difficult. Her voice carried well for someone who was meant to be neither seen nor heard, and right now she was so incensed that she erupted, larger than life. Even if she had been silent, the crowd gathered around her would have been sufficient to draw the eye. The young and the hungry of Espher's courts, some who had been waging secret political wars for decades, now standing shoulder-to-shoulder with one another, bobbing their heads to her words like they were ducks in a pond.

Artemio caught the tail end of it as he drew the horse up.

"...every moment that those scum are inside our fair city, they are staining her white stone with their darkness. Even now they might be preaching their false-god to our children. Even now they might be tearing the work of the masters to shreds..."

"Even now they might be listening to bellowed conversations." The crowd snapped around to look at him, and he saw it in their faces. The hunger. Glory and valor were just words to the old ones, but these children dressed in the flesh of men, they still believed that war was how a man proved his worth. That they could win on the battlefield and carry that victory with them for all time like a badge of honor. History might remember them that way, but their peers would not. They would remember the friends they'd lost and the blood they'd spilled, but on the field of battle there was nothing glorious. Just people killing people.

He was faced with a choice, to remain atop his horse and use the height to establish his superiority, his command. These were not men well versed in rhetoric, they would not recognize it as the crutch that it was. He would know, though. He would know that he did not trust in his own words to win them over so he had to borrow the authority that a beast of burden could bestow upon him. He slipped from the stirrups and met their eyes as his boots hit the mud.

For them, a siege was the worst of all possible outcomes. All the strain of maintaining an army with none of the opportunity for glory. There would be forays of course, but Covotana was a fortress as much as it was a city, and Artemio fully believed that starving out the enemy was a more likely victory condition than anything cunning.

“Duke Volpe... your sister was just...”

“Inciting you to launch an immediate attack upon the city while our army is exhausted from the march, has no equipment for the breaching of the walls, and is possessed of no plan for such an assault. Yes, I can see that.”

“Art, we need to drive them out.” He almost flinched at being called by his childhood nickname in front of all these people. Harmony’s manners were slipping. There was an edge of desperation to her voice that he hoped the gathered circus would note—if she were actually leading any astray rather than simply providing them with a rallying point in their pursuit of the goal that they had already set themselves upon. “We need to get back inside.”

“And we shall, but rushing at them now, with half our troops scattered to the wind and all of theirs well rested and fortified is not the way.”

One of the preening lordlings had the arrogance to speak up. “So you mean to press the attack when we have the numbers?”

Pale brown hair, olive tone, strong nose. “Lord Gazza, what I mean is that in this moment, our best course is the one I have prescribed. When that is no longer our best course, you can rely upon my judgement to steer us to the better one. Had I double the men and they were well rested, then I would most likely attempt to breach the city this moment. But though I know some of our company dwell in their dreams, that is not the scenario that reality has given us.”

That drew a titter from some of young Lord Gazza’s political rivals. He was ever the idealist, and now he was being put into his place by someone more schooled in rhetoric than even a performer of the Teatro.

Gazza flushed but had the good sense to remain silent as Artemio turned once more to his sister. “Harmony, would you come walk with me for a moment. I mean to inspect the enemy’s disposition on the walls and could use your eye.”

It seemed that Harmony’s little outburst was not yet done. “You’re Shadebound! Blow the walls down.”

He presented her with a placid smile, even though inside, his heart hammered with anger. The eyes of the lords were upon him. “Of course, dear sister, why didn’t I think of such a simple solution. Let me do just that. I’m certain that the greatest Shadebound throughout history were not called to reinforce the city walls in such a manner that they cannot be breached.”

Another round of giggles from the peanut gallery. Harmony did not look chastened in the least. “Then why can’t you fly over it?”

“We could, certainly. I and those other Shadebound willing to take the chance. And we would be cut down wheresoever we landed by the Agrantine sword-saints before we took a step.” That set off another round of murmurs. It seemed that those with their eyes locked on the horizon and the bright new dawn they had imagined for themselves had not managed to spot the gear those on the walls boasted. “Do you know why there are so few sword-saints? The true reason, not the bravado about the difficulty of their training and the requirement for natural talent.”

Harmony was growing more sullen with every passing moment, but she still wasn’t leaving her followers behind to be dressed down like a good little soldier. She was digging in her heels. “No.”

“Because for all of its wealth and vastness, the Agrantine Empire cannot produce more swords for them. Because the materials hammered into their steel are in fact so rare that just one of the swords up there is worth a fortune in the world beyond Espher’s borders. Do you care to wager why?”

Dark hair, pale skin, greens in his coat of arms; Lord Alce piped up as if it were a quiz in the House of Seven Shadows. “Meteoric iron.”

Lord Gazza called out, “One of the few materials in this world that are resistant to the effects of a shade.”

Artemio wondered if they thought they could get extra credit for their answers. “Precisely so. Blades that cut shades as surely as mortal flesh. How well would we fare against them, dear sister? The tiny fraction of us who can call ourselves Shadebound at all.”

Her mouth opened and shut. A mirror to his own hidden rage shining bright in her eyes. Something only he could see, only he could know. Artemio held out his hand to her. “Walk with me.”

Though the crowd had already parted, it seemed to take her forever to leave it as though the press of bodies had some gravitational pull. But she did come forward of her own volition to take a hold on his hand and crush his fingers together in his glove. She was going to be a real delight today, Artemio could already tell. “I shall have you back to these upstanding gentlemen in due course. Until then, perhaps they might assist in establishing the line.”

There was an explosion of industry from the young and stupid faction of the camp, with every one of them setting off to find whatever soldiers they had to their name and put them to work. Anything that reduced the number of useless nobles milling about was advantageous, so Artemio made no complaint that most of their men had likely already taken to the work with the due diligence of their class.

It was not long before they had strolled out of earshot, heading for the northern gate they had paraded out of with cheers from the peasantry what felt like a lifetime ago.

“I’m right, and you know I am. We need to strike now before they have time to dig in.”

“Dear sister, there is no digging required.” Artemio retrieved his crushed fingers from her grasp with a tug, leaving the glove behind. “They took the city, and now all of its defenses are theirs. It was built for siege, long before it became a hub of civilization. They have simply returned it to that purpose.”

She rounded on him then, eyes blazing with all the fury she’d been trying to hide from her little following. “You’ve lived here for years. You’re telling me you never worked out how to get in?” She snorted in disbelief. “It’s you.”

Artemio couldn’t keep the smile from his face. Not entirely. It was nice to know that even when they were at odds, his sister still had some faith in him. “While I have many potential solutions to the current state of affairs, I cannot proceed with any one of them until I’ve had time to assess the situation. The numbers of the enemy within our walls. The purpose of this invasion. It is impossible to make the correct decision without more information.”

“I know you, Art.” Whatever warmth and goodwill he’d been feeling towards her faded in the face of her glacial stare. “I know that your all your reasoning and calculations and historical quotes are just a mask to hide your own fear. You’re scared to try and take Covotana back, because you’re scared to see what’s inside. You’re scared the king is dead, and you’ll have to deal with it. You’re hiding out here, playing soldiers instead of facing reality.”

He swallowed the insults as if they were his due. He had never cared for the taste of them, but he could tolerate them if it got the poison drained from Harmony quicker. “If the kings were dead, then the Agrantine would have their heads on pikes outside the gates. It would immediately break the morale of our soldiers, and we would immediately descend into civil war.”

“Or it would incense the common people and nobles alike, and they’d rally behind the one man with a better claim to the throne than anyone else.”

Once more, his hand seemed to rise of its own volition to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Please don’t repeat Father’s old lies back to me as though they were truth.”

“You haven’t seen the way they look at you when your head is turned, Art. They just watched you beat an army of dragons. These men would follow you through the gates of the abyss if you would only ask. No speeches. No cunning plans that would convince them of your genius. Just loyalty. The kind that can’t be bought.” She had the good sense to speak softly at least. They were near the limit of accurate crossbow range of the gates now, and Artemio felt his attention splitting, one ear listening for the telltale thump of a bolt flying his way.

He tried to bite back on his sarcasm. “Yes, such loyalty that has every noble arguing back against every command I issue.”

“That’s just... that’s just how they are. That’s their nature. All of them scrambling over one another all the time to be on top of the pile.” She looked at him curiously, as if surprised that he hadn’t grasped some truth yet. “They aren’t doing it to try and get one over on you. Half of them are just trying to get in your line of sight and hoping you’ll remember their names.”

“That makes no sense.”

She shrugged her shoulders, and for a moment, she was his Harmony again. Not the bitter half-mad thing he’d had to drag south from the battlefield. “When have they ever made sense?”

He shook all thoughts of this nonsense off. “I cannot entertain these fancies. I have a war to wage and a throne to save.”

She caught him by the sleeve, turning his eyes from where they darted along the ramparts to meet her own. “But who’s going to sit on it?”

“While I appreciate a well-constructed deflection, I think we both know the reason you are so desperate to enter Covotana has nothing to do with who will be sitting the throne once it is reclaimed.” He’d tried to be polite, but she seemed intent on having this out. “The only reason you want me to throw all of these lives away in a fruitless attempt at a breach is because you want to see Kagan.”

“They don’t know who he is. And if they did, they might kill him just to rob us of Orsina. We have to...” She was rambling, all the anxieties that had been building up in her since she’d caught sight of the Agrantine flags on the walls pouring forth.

There was no option but to snap her out of it with the verbal equivalent of a slap. “He may already be dead. He may have been dead since Orsina fell on the battlefield. We cannot risk so many lives on so small a chance.”

Her mouth fell open, all of her rambling falling away to a reedy whine. Eventually she pulled herself together enough to snarl, “You unbelievable bastard.”

“Harm...” He held up his empty hands.

“No. Don’t ‘Harm’ me. You... You don’t get to placate me with your twisting words.” There was a sob in her voice. “You don’t care, do you? You don’t even care if she’s alive or dead.”

It hurt to admit it, but the truth was a necessary burden for all of them to bear. “With all of the life she fed to her shades in battle, I struggle to imagine how she or her impresario might have survived.”

There were tears in her eyes now, hanging there, not yet falling. He hated to hurt her, but he couldn’t let her hurt anyone else either. “So, all of this time you’ve been stringing me along with false hope?”

“Harmony... I... A slim hope is better than none, but it isn’t enough.” He stepped forward and tried to embrace her. “I will do all that I can to discover the state of Kagan, and I will do all that I can to ensure that you learn of Orsina’s fate as swiftly as possible, but I cannot... I cannot let it be the sole point informing all of my choices.”

She stepped back out of his encircling arms. Her own were at her sides. Knuckles whitening. “I’m an afterthought, as always. Why did I think that would change with Father gone?”

“Harmony, that isn’t fair.” Once more he had to swallow his own anger. It burned on the way down. “You’re asking me to condemn men to a fruitless death just so you might get your answer a little sooner.”

The tears finally broke free of Harmony’s eyes and streaked down her cheeks. He had become so accustomed to the dust of the road that he hadn’t even noticed that it covered her face until it washed away. They were all marred by the past few weeks. When she spoke, her voice was so soft he had to strain to hear it. “Do you even care for her at all?”

“Of course I care. Her birth and station mattered nothing to me. She was a friend to you when you’d had none before. She saved your life.” His actual feelings were a complex mangle of momentary encounters. Helping the girl to stitch up her wounded arm. Meeting her in the dead of night and convincing her not to flee. The evenings of polite company with Harmony there to

serve as chaperone. Or perhaps he was there to serve as chaperone for her. Everything was so mixed up. “She... she was my friend too. I hope.”

“Was?” Harmony’s eyes narrowed. “She was a friend?”

He wet his own dusty lips. “I misspoke.”

“You can’t lie to me, Art,” she snarled. “I’m not one of the simpering tag-alongs who think you’ll lift them up when you mount the throne. I know you.”

“Then you know that I still hope she lives and that I will do my utmost to confirm it as swiftly as possible, by whatever means I have available to me.” He wasn’t used to this. He’d spent his whole life preparing justifications for his decisions to his father, mother, tutors, and peers but never Harmony. She was the only one on his side. The only one he didn’t need to lie to or manage.

She spat on the packed earth between them. “How is laying siege to the city going to get us answers ‘swiftly’ exactly?”

“Leverage. Once we have the city besieged, we have power in negotiations. Once negotiations commence, I shall be able to seek minor concessions, such as the release of certain prisoners.”

She scoffed. “You really think they’d give him up so easily?”

“Once negotiations begin, I can also contact our agents within the city and palace and gather information. In all likelihood, Kagan will have been forgotten in the chaos. He is not in any official quarters. He is secluded from sight. They may not even know he is in the city.” He brushed past that. He had no idea if the Agrantine knew what the value of the Arazi was. Or how many of the peasantry would have given up every secret for the promise of softer treatment by their new masters. The whole game could already have been given away. Kagan could already be dead a dozen times over, even if he hadn’t died with Orsina in the battle.

“Look at me, Art. Look me in the eyes and tell me this is the quickest way to find out if Kagan is still alive.”

He met her eyes, and he knew he couldn’t lie to her. “It isn’t. Not by a long shot. But it is the best way. The way that puts nothing at risk that need not be at risk. That doesn’t fling us into the jaws of the southern beast with no hope of clawing our way back up its throat.”

“What is the quickest way?” She held out her hands, and tentatively he took them.

“Have a shade fling us over the walls, fight our way through to Kagan.” He was being honest, so he may as well be entirely honest. “Die in the attempt or in the escape.”

She took a steadying breath, and he wondered how often she had been doing this, managing him. “What’s the quickest way that doesn’t kill us?”

He nodded along the wall to the eastern side of town. “Wait until nightfall tomorrow, infiltrate through the waterway, where the river flows out of the city. They’ll have it guarded, but not well enough. From there, try to contact allies within the walls. Gather intelligence.”

She frowned at that. “Do we have any allies within the walls?”

“I do.” His mind flickered through the masked faces of the Last King cult. To the ones he had seen unmasked and could approach. The ones who were liable to have smoothly assumed the same roles in service to the Agrantine. “And if I can contact them, then so shall you.”

Harmony’s brows drew down. “Why wait until tomorrow night?”

“Because tonight, the Agrantine will be on high alert. Tomorrow they will believe we are settling in for a long siege.”

She tightened her grip on him. Like she could wrench the truth from him. Like he was ever going to lie to her. “Was this your plan all along?”

“Dear sister, you wound me.” He managed a smile at last. “You think that I only have one scheme operating at any given moment?”

She snorted. “Idiot.”

Drawing in a deep breath, he asked the necessary question. “Can I trust you not to lead an attack on the walls the moment my back is turned?”

“And go against the will of the one true king?” She forced a smirk. “Who would dare?”

He rolled his eyes once more. “That’s quite enough of that too. All it takes is for the wrong ear to catch words such as those and we’ll both be dead.”

“Or crowned.”

He squeezed back. Snapping her full attention to his words. “A crown matters little if the head that bears it is no longer on your shoulders.”

She released one of his hands so they were left in position to shake on their deal. “I shall refrain from inciting rebellion so long as you prove to me that you are doing your utmost to find out what has happened to Orsina.”

“As you wish, dear sister.” They shook hands. Like merchants making a trade. It was not a true formality. Their class made promises with paper and seals, not words and skin. But it was the ghost of one that should never have been placed between family. He didn’t know how to bridge the chasm of grief that separated them.

He was about to say something more, something to bring them back together, to make them feel like they were on the same side, when the trumpets sounded.

3 - The Death Trade

Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

Harmony's hand went to the sword on her belt, her father's sword, passed along by Art before the battle on the steppes and never reclaimed. The sudden eruption of sound from the still and silent city had brought all the preparations out here in the killing field surrounding it to an abrupt halt.

The great gates of the city spread open with an awful shrieking sound, rust set into the hinges so deep there was likely little iron left. The doors hadn't been closed in generations; it was small wonder they were mad about getting moved again so soon. She glanced to her brother. "Is it the counterattack?"

After another quiet moment's assessment, he shook his head. "Look."

From the center of the gatehouse, a white banner was being unfurled by a pair of sword-saints. Unfurling to show the same golden eye, barely visible on the creamy expanse of fabric. It must have been a nightmare to keep that clean. "Surrender? They're giving up already?"

"Parley." His placid smile was grim to her eyes. "They want to talk."

"That's what you wanted too. Right?"

"Once the cordon was established and we had a platform from which to negotiate." He turned to face the gates head-on, even as a swarm of lesser nobles came barreling across the field to line up behind him in a ridiculous show of force that would do nothing to impress the Agrantine.

A single figure emerged from the gates of Covotana, garbed in simple black and head shaved bald, like all of the Agrantine. How Art was able to recognize the woman from a momentary glance escaped Harmony entirely, but he hissed over to her, "It is Ambassador Modesta. Please do not... just don't speak to her unless she speaks directly to you, and even then, keep it brief. Give her nothing."

"This isn't my first time in hostile territory, Art." Honestly, he still treated her like they were children half the time. Like he was her big brother instead of her twin. "We've had the same life."

There was a long reluctant moment as Art tried to find the words, before finally, begrudgingly muttering, "She's better at this than we are."

It was enough to drag Harmony's stare away from the tall, lithe woman stalking towards them. "Better than you?"

Once more, Art seemed to be having a hard time trying to get his words out before eventually grunting out, "Yes."

She crossed her arms across her stomach and smirked. "Well, now I cannot wait to see the show."

"Whose side are you on, again?"

The ambassador had stopped her approach well within crossbow reach of the walls. She was showing faith by walking out and letting them close the door behind her, but she wasn't stupid enough to let her life go unavenged if the oh-so-civilized nobles of Espher decided to take a swing at her.

Art turned to the gathered crowd. "Let's see what she has to say for herself."

There was some ribald chuckling among the mounted nobility. As though Art was Father coming home to find that the rugs hadn't been beaten rather than a general returning to find his capital lost. She supposed that it was another one of the calculated, clever little things that he'd say to make them give him their trust, but it did not sit well with her. Pretending as though a woman could not conquer, only keep house, when the evidence to the contrary was right in their faces.

When Art set out, Harmony went with him, a step behind him. If he died, she died. It made no difference if the two of them walked into easy range of the Agrantine crossbowmen or only he did.

When they arrived, dust-streaked and battered from war and chaos, Ambassador Modesta smiled at them as though they were joining her for tea. She was clean, her scalp freshly shaved. The simple black dress that she always wore for her supposed religious modesty was crisply pressed. "A joy to see you again Duke Volpe. Was the journey home from your war with the Arazi pleasant?"

"I suspect that it would have been more pleasant if I had a home to return to." Artemio seemed to see no issue with cutting straight to the point, even if it did make Harmony wince.

"Come now," Modesta tittered. "What is a little invasion between friends?"

If the Agrantine woman had a fan like one of the courtiers lingering around the Teatro, Harmony thought she would have flicked or fluttered it about then. Was this woman flirting with Artemio after stealing his city out from under him?

“Rather rude, if I’m to be honest.” He crossed his arms across his chest with exaggerated care, so as not to excite any archers watching from a distance. “It was my understanding that we parted on good terms.”

“The very best of terms.” Modesta fluttered her lashes at him. There was no way Art was oblivious to all this. What had passed between these two? What was going on? Harmony was bursting with questions, but she bit them back. “With you owing a great debt of gratitude to Agrant for preserving your life. You led me to believe that you did not share your father’s prejudice against us. Was this false?”

“Madam, there is a vast difference between judging a person for their place of birth and judging them for the actions they take.” Whatever they’d said to each other before, it was apparent that Artemio was simmering over with irritation at her. He’d thought she was on his side, somehow. Even though she was Agrantine.

A little line appeared between Modesta’s eyebrows. “My loyalty has never been to you, but to my husband, the Eternal Emperor. Am I to understand that you feel betrayed?”

Artemio was still for a long moment, the thoughts tumbling over in his head too fast for them to spill out, the way that he got sometimes. Then it passed, and he sighed and uncrossed his arms. “If I am being honest, no. Expecting you to behave in any other manner is like expecting a viper not to bite.”

“Then I believe that we still have an understanding of each other.” She reached out a hand to him, and he shook it. There was no lingering touch, no warmth in the act, it was perfunctory. “You are loyal to Espher, I to Agrant. But does that mean that we must be at cross-purposes?”

He huffed out a breath in surprise. “When Agrant means to conquer Espher, I believe it does.”

“I do not feel that this is so.” With a little shrug of one shoulder, Modesta stepped back, clearing her archers’ line of sight to them but not moving out of striking range for either of their swords. Art would be analyzing every word she said and every move she made, but to Harmony’s eyes, it could only mean one thing. She wasn’t scared of them. She didn’t consider

them to be a threat. It was an insult disguised as politeness. “Perhaps with time, and a good night’s rest, you might come to the same conclusion?”

“I suspect that a good night’s rest shall be denied to me out here on the siege plain, at least until the rest of our forces arrive, but who knows what the future holds? Perhaps they’ll bring soft beds along with siege weapons.”

That was a clumsy bluff for Art, and Harmony could tell from the ambassador’s widening smile that she’d seen clean through it too. Espher had committed everything it had to facing the Arazi, nothing held back. Anyone living in the capital would have known that.

Instead of calling him out, she turned that smile into an invitation. “Would you care to discuss the possibilities of the future further?”

There should have been some hesitation, some searching for a trap in the words, but Art, he just dove right in. “It would doubtless be to the benefit of both Agrant and Espher if this matter can be settled without further bloodshed.”

“Shall we retire to somewhere more comfortable?” Modesta gestured back to the city.

It was too much. Too dangerous. Too stupid. Harmony blurted out, “You most certainly will not.”

“Harmony,” Art snapped. “Please.”

“You are Harmony Volpe?” Modesta’s gaze flitted to Harmony the moment she opened her mouth. Like before, a wall of silence separated them and protected Harmony from her attentions, but now that it had been breached, the full weight of that gaze bore down on her. “What a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I have heard so much about you.”

It was a thrust. So, Harmony parried. “Whatever he told you was probably a lie.”

“Harmony.” Art actually took his eyes off their opponent to pinch at his nose again. Like she was giving him a headache. Like she was the problem here, not this southern fanatic trying to drag him out of sight and butcher him.

“Alas, your brother and I have spoken little of family matters, beyond the reason that his courtship of me could not proceed.” Another calculated thrust at what she saw as a weak spot in their united front. She’d seen her fake flirting confusing Harmony earlier, so she was laying it on thicker. “All that I have heard of you has been through your peers. Perhaps they have painted a more truthful picture of you?”

Harmony was caught off guard again. Nobody knew her. Nobody spent time with her except Art and Orsina. That was all that was in her mind when she blurted out, "I don't have any peers."

"Quite so." Modesta's laugh was like sparkling wine. She was taking the blunt statement as bravado. "Much has been made of your talents with the sword. It would bring me great joy if we might someday cross our blades upon the sparring grounds. Would you enjoy that?"

There was no secret message encoded in that one. If this old maid wanted to fight, Harmony would be more than happy to give it to her. "Anywhere, anytime."

Art cleared his throat loudly. "What my sister means is that once the current situation has resolved, we will have ample opportunity for such diversions."

"I believe that your sister speaks for herself, and she has made her opinions quite clear." Modesta continued to give Harmony her undivided attention until the very last moment, then glanced back to Art. "Shall we return to the matter at hand?"

Artemio let out a soft breath of relief. "To where did you intend for us to retire?"

"I believe that the palace has many empty rooms at the moment. Would it not seem the correct place to discuss Espher's future?"

"You would have me walk inside the city with you, leaving my army here?"

"I do not believe we have enough empty rooms for quite so many guests." She always seemed to be laughing or smiling. Harmony couldn't tell if it was with them or at them. "And it is not their opinions on matters that I seek. Do you think any would volunteer to join you?"

Once again, Harmony felt obliged to speak up. "Artemio, you can't."

He cast a sly glance her way. "I do believe that you were the one who wanted me to get inside the city, dear sister."

"You can't!" This was madness. This was as bad as flinging himself over the walls like he'd said before. Worse, because she wouldn't even be there to protect him. And she knew that this wasn't the cautious, smart choice. She knew that he was choosing to do this stupid thing because of her nagging at him to find out about Kagan. He was going to throw his life away and kill them both in the bargain for her answer. An edge of pleading came into her voice. "You'd be a hostage. Think. Please."

He gave her a wry smile. "I doubt that my death would overly trouble the high lords and ladies of Espher so badly that they could not maintain the siege in the event of my demise."

“You’d be wrong.” Harmony still couldn’t believe that he was so observant about some things and so blind to others. For a moment, she couldn’t even understand it, but she didn’t have to tread far down familiar paths of thought before she came to the usual conclusion. Father. He had convinced Art that no matter what his eyes might tell him, he would never be loved or respected. He’d convinced him with every snide comment and every strike of his belt. Art could understand anything except his own value.

Help came from an unexpected quarter. “I find myself to be in agreement with your sister. Would it not put you at something of a disadvantage in any negotiations that we undertake if you feel your life would be forfeit should you go against my wishes?”

Harmony barked with bitter laughter. “Wasn’t that the whole point of your invitation?”

“Ladies, the invitation is an exchange. Not a kidnapping.” He held up his empty hands once more. “I will be placing myself into the power and protection of the Ambassador Modesta, and in return, the leader of the Agrantine forces here will be placed into mine.”

Modesta’s head cocked to one side, her pristine smile never faltering. “I am not certain that I follow.”

“Just as having the ambassador remain as a guest within our camp while I undertake discussions with one of her underlings would result in our mutually assured destruction should any harm come to either one of us, so too does inviting me into her company. While my weapons may be taken from me, I remain Shadebound. Swift she may be with a blade, but my power cannot be blunted by steel.”

“You truly believe that you could slay me faster than I might disable you?” At last, the good humor seemed to drain from Modesta’s voice, and she was taking matters seriously. As though the rulership of Espher was some trifle to be discussed over dinner, but the possibility of one of the foremost Shadebound in generations being able to best her in single combat was a subject for the most stern debate.

“My belief matters little. Only the facts of the situation.” He shrugged his shoulders. “The principal of those being that I am Shadebound. So long as I am within Covotana, Ambassador Modesta will do all that she can to keep me from harm, and in return, I shall do no harm to her. Lest both of us face our ends.”

Modesta was still hung up on that part. “You honestly believe you could do me harm?”

“Fire can burn faster than a blade swings, Ambassador.”

All three of them fell silent at that, and even Harmony felt a little sheepish at how she had been trying to protect him. Truth be told, he had power enough to protect both of them, and then some.

“Then we have an accord?” Modesta held out her hand to him for the same butcher’s or baker’s handshake he had given his own sister scant minutes before.

“No, we don’t!” Harmony caught his wrist as he reached for Modesta. The movement was too fast. A crossbow bolt loosed. Striking off a cobblestone before skittering to a halt by their feet. A grim reminder of the situation they were in. Modesta glared back at the gates while the Volpe twins discussed matters further.

“Dear sister, while I am inside with the ambassador, I would ask that you convey the situation to the rest of my command and allow them to rely upon your instincts when matters of judgement arise.”

She couldn’t voice how terrible an idea this was. All she could do was plead with her eyes.

“My orders remain as they have been from the beginning. You are to lay siege to the city, preventing any aid from reaching the Agrantine until such time as I return. If you find that you are incapable of pursuing this course, seek out your favored of the other dukes. I’m sure one of them will be more than happy to assume command in my absence.”

“I assure you that your brother shall be well cared for, my dear girl,” Modesta piped up, as if anything she could say would make this feel better. “We Agrantine have made a truly terrible impression upon you, as our hosts, thus far, and it is my hope that we might remedy that by offering him some succor and comfort while we bring an end to this unfortunate situation. Surely that is not objectionable to you?”

“Artemio.” Harmony took a deep but unsteady breath. “This is not the safest course.”

“But you cannot deny that it is the fastest.” He flashed her a smile then. His true smile, the one she didn’t believe anyone else in the world had ever seen. “Do try to remember what I told you regarding my myriad schemes and how to proceed with them.”

It wasn’t a subtle code, as far as codes went. In fact it was so obnoxiously obvious he was hinting at something secret that Harmony was amazed Modesta hadn’t jumped down their throats looking for more details. She continued to watch them impassively. Smile fixed in place as though it had been painted on.

Harmony made a joke of it. The only thing she could think to do to stop herself from sobbing. He was telling her that he would arrange things so the entrance by the waterway would be safe for her. He was doing all of this so she could get inside and see Kagan. Despite whatever it might cost him. Despite all of his fears for the future of his beloved Espher. “How is any one woman meant to keep track of so many things?”

“I’m certain you will be able to focus upon the ones that matter,” he reaffirmed, just in case he had not been blatantly obvious enough up until this point. “Just as I will.”

Then he took Modesta’s hand, and they shook on the deal.

Harmony repressed a shiver, then the two of them were off, still hand in hand, heading back towards the gates. Artemio did not look back, and that was probably for the best because if she had seen any hint of fear in his eyes, she would have begged him to stay. Fought off the Agravantine hag. Done whatever it took to protect him from the terror he was choosing to stroll right into.

He would have known that, and that was why he did not look back.

Instead, she had to force herself to turn away, to trudge back along the path to the waiting army, every man of which was watching with undisguised horror as their general walked off with the leader of the enemy. Abruptly, they were all shouting. At Art, at her, at one another. It was such a cacophony that she did not hear the gates being opened and shut behind her. It was only when she turned around amidst the tumult that she realized it was too late. He was gone. He was inside.

It sparked fury in her. That was good, she could use it. She turned around, raised a hand for silence, and when she didn’t get it, her shout came out as a roar. “Shut up!”

Not a one of the high lords and ladies on their high horses had ever been spoken to in such a manner, and it had the desired effect. If only for the moment it took for them to pull themselves together from the surprise. “Duke Volpe issued you orders. You are to obey those orders to the letter while he is occupied. If there is confusion over any of those orders, you may come to me for clarity.”

It was one of the few women in the group who managed to find her voice first. Harmony didn’t have her brother’s encyclopedic knowledge of the noble houses of Espher, so she couldn’t have said who she was. “Might your brother have left an explanation for his actions along with those orders?”

“Duke Volpe does not need to explain himself to you. However, for the sake of clarity. The Agrantine hold the city, and he goes to negotiate their departure. If we can be rid of our invaders without spilling any more Espheran blood, then he’ll do it. If not, he’ll return with the vital intelligence that is required to conduct our siege with more brevity.” She couldn’t help but let a note of pride slip into her voice at that last part. Art was doing this for all of them. Taking all of the risks so that they didn’t have to. It was so like him that it made her angry she hadn’t seen it coming. He’d never been very good at sharing.

Another lord spoke up, though it seemed unintentional. “Why would anyone go willingly into that nest of vipers?”

“It’s quite simple, my lord.” She really needed to learn some names. “He’s planning on negotiating until negotiations fail, then setting the whole damned nest on fire.”

There was a fresh murmur spreading among the nobles at that sentiment. It was a little bit of a stretch of the truth, but at this point, having seen what Art would do for them, and for Espher, not a one of them could openly doubt her words.

One by one, they began to pull away from the edges of the line, returning to their troops, returning to their stations, digging in for a siege as commanded. Planning to starve out the most well-stocked stronghold in all the world. Until finally only that first woman remained, staring down at Harmony where she stood in the mud. “Would you care for a ride back to your command, my lady?”

Harmony wasn’t sure she should be showing any favor to a woman who’d just demonstrated open defiance to her family, but she was far too tired to walk the distance after everything else had taken its toll. “If you would be so kind…”

“Duchess Granchio.”

She forced a smile onto her face. “Of course, Duchess, I did not recognize you in your armor.”

“Do not worry, girl, I couldn’t remember the name of any of the boring old people in court when I was your age either.”

Harmony had to strangle the laugh before anyone else could hear. She took the offered hand and felt the strength in the arms that hoisted her up. “My thanks to you.”

“Any aid that I can offer you, I will give you freely, my lady.”

Even as the horse wheeled and she was forced to tighten her grip on the woman's waist, Harmony felt the overwhelming desire to pull away. Nobody gave anything away for nothing. "Strange that whenever someone tells me they're giving something freely I always have to pay for it later."

"Hah." Duchess Granchio's laugh was as coarse as her straightforward manner of speaking. "Perhaps there's hope for you yet."

Yet when Harmony cast her glance back to the looming city walls, it felt as though it were in scant supply.