

## 21 - The Wake

### Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

Pain was Artemio's first attendant. A deadening ache in the heart of him. Like some organ had been plucked from beneath his ribs. His breath hitched as it came in and rumbled as it left him. If pain had been the only one to greet him as reality ensued, then he would have been grateful, but once pain had arrived it dragged him kicking and screaming back out of the pleasant abyss into which he had sunk and back to awareness. His eyes shot open, and he jerked up to sitting, almost skewering himself on the tip of a sword.

His half-awake brain could not comprehend how this blade came to be there, until his eyes followed up the length of it and saw Harmony at the other end. "I woke up first."

Gummed up as his eyes may have felt, he could see clearly now, the razor tip of the blade aimed squarely for the middle of his neck, not a tremor in his sister's hands. Unsurprising, but still a little disappointing. He had hoped that when it came to this, she would have felt at least a twinge of sorrow. "Then may I offer thanks that you chose not to skewer me in my sleep."

The blade darted in closer but didn't quite cut into him. He could feel the sharpness of it against his skin, but it did not press hard enough to part it. She was truly skilled in the blade, not just talented or trained, but skilled, the way that a master of an art became with endless repetition. Beyond the blade that occupied all of his attentions, her eyes narrowed. "I wanted you to die knowing who had done it. I wanted you to know that in the end, you deserved it."

He pushed himself up onto his elbows, aching all the way. She drew the blade back. So for all that she was bitter, she still wanted to talk about it. Probably wanted him to talk her out of it. Except of course, he couldn't. He had betrayed her trust in possibly the most brutal way imaginable, and he would do it again without hesitation if it meant that Espher would survive. "Less of a comfort, but my thanks all the same."

One step brought her closer and the next put her boot on his chest, pushing him back painfully into the heap of rubble that he gradually realized had once been his throne. "Any last words? Pleading? Apologies?"

He looked up into her eyes, and felt truly that she was the one pleading. Desperate for him to offer her some way out of this. With their connection severed, she no longer had the justification of self-preservation. He could die and she could go on now. She could live without him. Flee this place. Do whatever pleased her. Yet here she was begging him to give her a reason not to follow through.

There was no reason to give. "I have done nothing wrong."

She laughed out loud at that, but there was no amusement in it. Only bitter regret. Regret that she had trusted him for so long. "You betrayed me. Betrayed us. All the promises, all the..."

"I promised nothing." He cut her off and pushed himself up again. She either had to crush him down into the stone once more or step back, and she chose to let him rise. "Now stand aside, I've a kingdom to save."

"What kingdom?" No longer was she conflicted about letting him live, now that the part of her that wanted him hurt was in agreement with the part that wanted him to live. There was such cruelty in her laugh as she let him up. She was delighted to tell him the bad news. "It's all gone Art. I told you I woke up first. I looked outside too, before coming to check if you were dead."

Artemio had assumed that his absence from the waking world had been only momentary given how badly he still ached, he revised his mental timeline. "The Arazi learned of Konus demise and began to assault the city."

"They're pretty much finished assaulting it, actually." She smirked, as if the end of their kingdom and the slaughter of their people had no effect on her at all, delighted to be scoring points against him. She had truly become obsessed with Orsina in a way that he had not foreseen but should have predicted. Her entire life she had been conditioned to focus all of her passions externally, onto him, so it was small wonder that she would transfer that same fixation onto the first subject of affection that she encountered beyond him. At the time, he had been so pleased that "I'd be amazed if there were two bricks still atop one another anywhere in Covotana."

Everything that he had worked for, everything that he had strived for, all of his life, it was all laid to ruin. One miscalculation and everything was finished. Yet still he could not see where he had made a mistake. The correct course was to kill Orsina, there was no other interpretation of the facts that allowed her to live and Espher to thrive.

Emotion threatened to overrun him, to make him weep or scream or despair, but he would not allow it. There was no place in a king for such weakness, or such sentimentality. This was

a problem to be solved, nothing more. More information was required. Casual as he could, he remarked, “The palace seems none the worse for wear.”

“I suppose that the rampaging monsters got distracted on the way here.”

The grin had dipped ever so slightly as Harmony spoke. Easy to read.

“Orsina, I presume.”

“Yes, you’re so bloody clever, you’ve got it all worked out.” She began clapping her hands together, as if to remind him exactly how much all of this had cost him. “Well congratulations, you’re king of a pile of ashes and you tried to murder the only one keeping us from being ashes too.”

He crouched carefully to retrieve their family sword from among the ruins, sliding it into its sheath at his belt as though never doubting Harmony would let him. It was difficult with the slice down his palm still bleeding, but not impossible. She had not cut deep enough to sever tendons. Only to draw first blood. Showing fear would encourage a violent response, so he had to proceed as though all was well. Just as he always had.

There had been little opportunity to explain his decision to Harmony ahead of time, and in truth he had intended to deceive her about it if possible, but now he was being given a chance to make her understand the danger that Orsina presented. He just had to be careful not to overplay his hand. “It is not murder if it was self-defense.”

“Oh yes, of course, some clever assassination plot by Orsina that somehow everyone else in the world failed to see.” She was not attacking him, but neither had she sheathed her weapon when she saw him doing so. He was still ostensibly her hostage, and she was still blocking his immediate exit from the room.

This conversation was not merely an attempt to persuade her as to the correctness of his choices, it was the key to leaving this room alive and saving what was left of the city. “It was not a matter of plots, but a matter of nature. She has become too dangerous by far.”

Harmony’s contempt was thick enough to be spread with a knife. “Because the people actually love her?”

With another king such a statement might have stung, but he had been actively coopting Orsina’s popularity from the beginning so it hardly hurt his feelings to have it acknowledged that a young pretty girl who spent all of her time trying to be empathetic to the plight of others while also wielding immense power that could make lesser mortals quake would prove more popular than him. It was inevitable. “Because her power is unbound. Nothing is free, nothing is created from nothing. For a time the font of the dragon may have sustained her, but the things she does now would have drained even that deep well.”

“So what?” Harmony’s sword had dipped down to her side now. If it did come to a fight, she would still have the drop on him, but her guard was slipping. “You want her dead because she isn’t limited like you?”

“We are limited by the fundamental rules of the universe.” He couldn’t help but allow some small tinge of his irritation slip into the conversation. The reason that he had become so capable of solving mysteries was that an unsolved one grated on his soul. This particular puzzle was aggravating beyond measure. “You cannot create something from nothing. She is drawing strength from somewhere; I just cannot understand where.”

For a time, they were quiet, the distant sounds of battle and death echoing in through the missing rear wall of the palace, the stone that remained intact creaking and groaning. The whole place would come down soon enough, on top of them if they did not get moving. It was ridiculous to think that he had presided over Espher for less than a year and already lost the entire palace, all in one brief stretch of moments.

Finally, Harmony offered up a proposal. “Shades.”

Perhaps his assumption that Harmony had ever listened to a word that he’d said through the years had been mistaken. As he’d proceeded through his education with both tutors and the House of Seven Shadows, he had been sure to keep her informed of each new development of his learning, so that she might better understand his capabilities, and the form that their future would take after his graduation. It was his belief that she had absorbed at least the basics required to understand what he was talking to her about. Which was why this latest statement somewhat beggared belief. “They are the tools through which we expend our life, levers with which to move the balance of the world, not sources of power in themselves.”

But Harmony was not to be shamed. “Not to you, but I just saw her eat Konus and his dragon.”

He cast a glance around the ruined chamber. “The corpses seem remarkably intact for such a thing to have...”

“Their shades, Art.” She cut him off. He very carefully did not smile when she used the diminutive of his name that was normally reserved for their private conversations. It would have given too much away, but her use of it meant that she was failing to emotionally distance herself from him as she would have needed to if she meant to kill him. Everything was progress. “They died, their shades left their body, she... swallowed them.”

It was only after she had finished speaking and he had finished resisting the urge to grin at his small victory that he ran back through what she had just said and realized what it might

mean. A shade contained some small measure of life, typically retained from when it was a living creature. If it did not have this spark, then it would simply dissipate into nothing. Providing shades with additional life increased their stability and strength, while also allowing them to exercise such power as they had over the world in specific ways. Inverting that equation so that the shades being harnessed poured their life into the shadebound would typically have been utterly useless. There simply wasn't enough of the vital spark within them to make it worthwhile. The only way that Orsina could make it work would be to consume such a ridiculous volume of shades that it would counterbalance the energy she was expending. And none of this could possibly work unless she was not forming pacts with her shades at all but simply allowing her current shades to run riot absorbing whichever shades were the most akin to them without their consent, which in turn would require an expenditure of power that would be counterproductive. A net increase of nothing.

Absorbing even the most powerful of shades would fail to produce any increase in the font of her power, as the effort to forcibly absorb them would always be at least equal to what they could provide. More often it would likely be a loss. She should have burned herself out by now.

All of these thoughts were buzzing through his head rapid fire as he approached his inevitable conclusion, but his body was already in motion even as he pieced the final parts together. Her shades would be starving, overwhelmingly strong compared to even the great shades of old, but desperate for more life, and she had learned how to extract that life by force from others. How long would it be until she and her residents recognized that there was a far more ready source of life available to them than the spirits of the dead?

“We have to stop her.”

Harmony, all but forgotten since he'd latched onto this puzzle was standing in his path, blade to his throat once more. “Since your last attempt to stop her involved assassination by dragon, you'll forgive me if I'm a little reluctant to carry through with your plan without a little more explanation than that.”

“Then walk and talk at the same time, dear sister, and we may still have some hope of seeing dawn.”

They delayed for just a moment. She met his gaze then, and in it, she seemed to find the confirmation that she needed, that he was still going to provide her with the answers that she needed. That she could still trust him.

That was the wonderful thing about earning the trust of others through their reliance on his brilliance. In the end, no matter how his choices harmed them, logic prevailed.

Harmony fell into step beside him, and he resisted the urge to throw his arm around her shoulders for support. He had never drawn deeply upon her life when they were bonded, but now that the connection was severed he felt not only bereft, but decaying. So much of his strength had been spent trying to stop Orsina before he had even understood what he faced, and even now he felt as though there was some missing component in the puzzle that he could not grasp. Still, his understanding was sufficient to convey the key points to his sister, so that she might be convinced. “The mechanism by which she is gaining power is fundamentally flawed, the shades cannot receive the sustenance that they require to continue. The only way for them to support a continuation of the system is by directly consuming living creatures. Tearing life out of them directly. If she has not already begun doing so, she will reach the limit of her reserves soon and instinctually reach for survival.”

Whatever guards had still been lingering in the palace in the midst of the battles outside had fled as the building began its slow collapse. The courtiers who had not retreated to cower in their chambers and await the inevitable had fled for the hills at the earliest opportunity, when the building fell, the cowards would die. He could not bring himself to feel much sorrow over that.

Still, it meant that the way was clear for them to head straight out through parts of the palace that were usually clogged thoroughfares in record time, despite the lack of spring in his step.

Harmony’s face was clouded with doubt, but all that she could manage to voice was, “Orsina wouldn’t do that.”

Such faith in her lover, even after all that she had seen. Even knowing what the girl had become, she still thought only the best of her. Trying to disillusion her would have been pointless, even counterproductive. Artemio would not attempt it. “Nor would she breathe if it were left to her rational mind to manage, but in matters of survival, instinct takes over without our conscious decision.”

They emerged into the night air to find that it had not cooled. Normally the rising mists from the fountains around the palace bathed summer nights and brought them back down to comfortable, but tonight all of Espher burned. Blazing pyres made of the homes of Covotana filled the skies with smoke and the air with a heat that was almost choking.

It took only a glance at the dragons swooping down from on high to judge Orsina’s position. They set off with all immediacy towards the shattered husk of Septombra.

So much had changed in the time that they had been inside, the great victory that had been one had been snatched away, and all of Artemio’s worst nightmares had come true. His

only hope was that with Orsina's defeat, the Arazi might find some comfort in the idea that their leader had been avenged and take their rampage elsewhere. If they did, then Artemio would have been starting over, all of Espher rebuilt from scratch with all the most deadly enemies arrayed against her neutered. It would take centuries to rebuild, but he had plans. Plans for reformation and reconstruction. A new Espher, better and brighter than the one before. He could remake this kingdom into something that could last the test of time.

But first, they had to stop Orsina.

One thing that had not changed was Harmony's stride. They moved through the city together in perfect synchronicity. Shoulder to shoulder despite all that had passed between them. "So how exactly do you plan on stopping her?"

The thought had crossed Artemio's mind, and he suspected that it was going to involve the kind of sacrifices that he had never wanted to make, but revealing every detail of his plans would once again unravel his tentative truce with Harmony, so he took a different tact, "Me? I mean to do nothing. You are the one she is so smitten with. The one she trusts. You will convince her to stop channeling whatever shades are within her and return to a state of calm."

"Which is when you'll stab her in the back."

The idea that Harmony was entirely witless had never entered his mind. She had been easy to manipulate because he held the weighted emotional levers of her history at the ready. Not because she was without guile.

He diverted. "Which will be the moment that she no longer constitutes a threat. If she will stop, if she can stop, then what she is becoming is not something so fearful. She will be... powerful beyond all measure, but she will not be what the Arazi feared."

Their progress down the boulevards was slowed as they had to pick their way over the corpses of dead peasants, dead Arazi and their mounts. Typically Harmony would have sprung over them like a deer, but it seemed she too was feeling sluggish after their earlier conflict.

Eventually she asked. "And if she can't stop?"

He spoke softly. Careful not to spook her as they drifted near to dangerous conversational waters. "Then we must stop her."

Harmony scoffed. "You couldn't even touch her. Even trying to kill me and feed me to your shades wasn't enough."

"You must reach her." He tried to redirect her again, keep her focused on the goal. Infighting would serve them no good.

Their progress, slow as it had been, now came to a complete halt as Harmony crossed her arms. “So I’m meant to just forget that you tried to kill me?”

Why was he always the only one to see the necessity of discussing matters of importance first and emotion second. There was too much at stake for them to be dithering at the last moment over who had attempted to murder who. “It was the only means I had to...”

“You tried to kill me, Art.” She cut him off before he could even begin bloviating.

It seemed that until she felt that she had a sufficient answer to this accusation, the rest of the world could just go to hell for all that she cared. He almost admired her ability to focus so intently upon entirely the wrong problem.

Mustering up what he could of a normal human reaction, he tried for an apology. “For that, I am truly sorry. I never wanted for it to come to this.”

Her answer came in a roar, all of her frustration and fury finally loosed. This was what she wanted, what she needed to get out of her system so that they could proceed, and Artemio would allow for the delay. Better now than in the heat of battle. “You brought us to this. You could have just...”

The hair upon the back of Artemio’s neck began to prickle, and his gaze was drawn to the side. Looming over them was one of the mongrel men that they were so accustomed to politely ignoring. Part pig, but Artemio’s estimations. Behind him lingered a trio of other men in varying states of filth, they may have been entirely human underneath the caking of mud and soot, but who could tell? “How can I assist you gentlemen?”

The pig man spoke. “You go no further.”

Artemio looked up into his snout and sneered. “I go where I please, Espher may be beleaguered, but I am still her king.”

From behind them, another voice called out. Younger, clearer. “There is only one king and his name is death.”

“Oh, you’re one of those people. Well, that is rather unfortunate.”

“One of what people?” Harmony whispered all too loudly by his side. “What is this Art?”

He cast a glance back over his shoulder. From the ruins and the rubble of the once beautiful city, the traitors and peasants had emerged. With the top of Covotana laid to waste by dragon fire, he supposed it was unsurprising that the underbelly should now be turned up to face them. “The cult that was murdering nobility in the last year of the Cerva reign. We encountered them beneath the city...”

Harmony wet her lips. “So...”

“So we fight, dear sister.” He drew his sword.



There was a sparkle in her eye that he had not thought to ever see again. “Just like old times.”

## 22 - Dragonfall

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

Kagan clung to Yelena's back as she launched them up through the maelstrom. "We have to stop her."

We need do nothing of the sort. She has come into her power at last. All that we have loaned her until now shall be repaid threefold.

Blades of blinding white light ripped screaming through the air all around them. Crescent moons rising from earth to stars. The dragons that they touched were split asunder without a drop of blood spilled. Their riders falling to the ground unnoticed.

Yet still the Arazi came on, one after another after the next, an endless cavalcade of suicidal assaults that could do nothing in the face of their adversary.

Far beneath them in the charred circle that had once been the House of Seven Shadows, the flames did not touch Orsina. The venom sprayed down, hit that which had been sprayed before and froze as just another layer. Endless strata of it encasing her. A shield of frozen flame.

Kagan spoke aloud though he could not even hear the passing of the wind. It had become habit in these southern lands, and he found that now he had no desire to break it. "This isn't her, she wouldn't want this. She's lost control. We have to put a stop to it before..."

Yelena spun suddenly, avoiding a descending wyvern by a matter of feet. It had no rider upon its back, but the saddle was still visible as it shot by.

Before what? Before she proves her majesty to all of the world. Before she fills them with such fear that they will never dare try to harm us again?

Her admiration for Orsina sickened him. All of this time, he had thought Yelena saw in the girl what he had seen, the kindness in her heart, not the potential in her ghosts. "This isn't about us! She's everything that Konus feared and more. She's like the burned ones reborn. A terror."

Down beneath them the Arazi now tried to crush Orsina with weight of numbers, to drown her in their blood. They flung themselves down at her, and those that made it past the interlocking sickle blades being flung out in every direction simply found the shadows waiting for them, to grasp at them, to rend their wings with clawed fingers. To pry scales from skin and dip deep inside, reaching, to strum tendons like lyre strings and pluck organs from beneath bones.

She did not kill them, she rendered them down to their component parts, as though she were searching for something in them. And each one that died released a shade, and each shade that fled was swallowed back into the shadows.

Do not tell me that you have succumbed to his old deception after all this time. You know that his Adversary was a fiction. You know that she is just a girl. A powerful girl, but a girl nonetheless.

Even Kagan's eyes were only so good. The awful details of Orsina's work on the ground faded from sight as they continued to rise. "Whatever she is, it makes the prophecies Konus used to tell around the campfire sound tame."

From up here, every part of the city was laid out like a map beneath them. The palace collapsed in on itself, the weight of all that stone tricked up into the sky by human hands finally returning it to where it belonged. It toppled in parts, one side crushing a building to its side, another vast shard slipping down into the heart of the old building like a stiletto into its heart.

The Arazi on the ground were slowed and stopped at every turn as they tried for Orsina. Collapsed buildings and fires had narrowed the routes through the city down to a handful, and each one of those now bore the tell tale marks of barricades. The people of Covotana had been rallied in Orsina's defense, and he couldn't help but feel a twinge of pride that despite everything that had occurred, she was so loved.

So what do you want? You want to turn on her, as the wingless king turned on her? You want to make an enemy of her?!

There were fewer and fewer wyvern up so high, they lacked the strength in their wings and the capacity in their lungs to pass to such lofty zephyrs. The only ones up here were Yelena and the other Aslinda.

They recognized Yelena, recognized Kagan, began shifting in their flight to curve in towards him, none making a rapid flight to attack them, but positioning themselves so that they might attack in a flock.

Kagan kept his eyes to the sky above. To the distant unwavering stars. "I want to help her remember who she is. Before she's too far gone to regret."

Yelena's emotions thrummed as though he had struck them. The old wound festering between them ripped open as he deliberately turned all of his attentions towards it. There was no hiding how he felt from her. No hiding his thoughts, and no point in making plans. But there was this.

She snarled and smoke poured back from her mouth, blinding him. What do you know of regret who walked free under the open sky while I rotted?

“Walked free? I was exiled!” He let his own bitterness wash down through her. Letting her know just how badly she had hurt him that night. Not only by her actions, but by her lack of trust in him. The one who was meant to share everything with her. “You were the one who decided you couldn’t wait, who choose for both of us. You decided to try to kill my father in his sleep and you expected me to go along with you willingly?!”

The reality was much more complex. Their thoughts had been flowing back and forth through the months building up to Yelena’s breaking point, and though Kagan had always leaned to caution and waiting to see how things would unfold, there could be no denial that he was possessed by the same thoughts as her. She might have planted the seed of rebellion in their partnership, but he had watered and tended it each and every day. Yet in those final moments, when he had realized what she was doing, and that she was trying to do it without him, he had been enraged. Betrayed by the one creature in all the world that was supposed to be incapable of betrayal.

She hammered her wings all the harder as rage flooded through her. He took it in, processed it as though it were his own and let it flow back down into her. Stoking the fires. Making both of them all the angrier instead of playing mediator to their emotions like he’d always been forced to do before.

If it wasn’t for you the Arazi would have been free.

He hadn’t even betrayed her back, if truth be told. Konus had read his concerns out of his mind without him ever getting the opportunity to voice them. The Prophet had been prepared for Yelena’s coming. Finally living up to his title by knowing what was going to happen before it did. “If it wasn’t for me, they’d have killed us both as slayers and every tribe would have gone to war for the throne.”

That would have been better. She raged, unable to believe that he still couldn’t understand this most basic principle of being Aslinda. That was our nature.

Through the final wisps of smoke and cloud they rose, into the vast and empty sky where even the Aslinda feared to rise. The air was so thin that Kagan felt like he was being choked, yet still he spoke, croaking out his condemnation of her. “We are more than nature. We think, we learn, we change. Just because our blood sings to us to fight and kill, we don’t have to listen. Just because you couldn’t stand the feeling that there was anyone stronger than you in your territory didn’t give you the right to attack...”

Yelena roared. He made slaves of us!

“He did! He was a monster, and he had to be stopped,” He was laid out upon her back now, clinging to her with arms and legs alike as the strength was drained from him by their height. “But you weren’t the one to do it. You were never strong enough to take the Prophet. You were never smart enough to outthink him.”

Her jaws snapped, as though she would have bitten him in two if he were in reach. An old threat never played out. If you hadn’t interfered...

With one last gasp, he said, “We’d both be dead.”

And now at last their great height began to rob her of breath too and she realized where they were. Hunting back through her memories to try and decipher why she had brought them there. Why are we flying so high?

He tightened his grip one last time. “Because you’ve never been smart enough to outthink me either.”

Finally she knew she had been deceived, that the will to fly higher and higher had not been her own. While she had been distracted in their argument, he had guided their flight, but now her full attention was turned to her actions. She pushed back against him with her will. Driving him back towards his own body.

It was dying. There was no air so high up, and with his death would come her own. She had no choice but to clamp her wings against her sides and drop like a falling star.

The Aslinda that had been gathering to attack reared back as Yelena plunged by. The clouds themselves rippled apart, and Kagan felt the concussion as their acceleration outpaced sound itself. They were in a dead-drop heading right back down on top of Orsina, back to where the air was rich and they could fight out their differences amidst the flames and despair of Espher’s dying throes.

Judging that now was the time, Yelena tried to spread her wings, and could not.

Just as she had forced her will upon him time and again, using him as a mouthpiece, now he too seized control over her. He could not hold her for long. It was not in his nature to dominate and demand the way that it was for her. But he did not need to hold her for long. In a plummet like this, a fraction of a second made all the difference between life and death. All that he needed to do was hold her still for just a few moments more.

She broke free of his control, spread her wings, nearly ripping them from their sockets, pain burning through the both of them, and she beat them with all the strength that she had. The power of flight that had carried them for a thousand miles, over mountain and forest, across oceans and deserts, throughout all of the centuries that they had shared one life, failed.

Her wings snapped back, broken and useless, and she fell.

In his final moments, with the walls of his mind raised as high as he could muster to block out his bond-mate's futile screams, Kagan could have sworn that he saw Orsina look up. He hoped that she understood what he was doing. That he was just trying to break her out of this frozen shell and remind her of who she was. If it cost his life to free her from her current course, from making a decision as terrible as Yelena's that would ruin her for all time, then it was a small price to pay.

Orsina raised her hand before the dragon struck, and darkness reached out to swallow him whole.

## 23 - The Last King

### Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

There was no vast explosion when Kagan and Yelena died. It felt as though there should have been more drama to it, but there just wasn't. They fell, they struck through the frozen lattice of dragon's venom and as they came into Orsina's reach they simply ceased to be. Dissolving away to nothing from the dragon's snout to tail as it plummeted close enough for her shades to touch without leaving her body.

Harmony, soft hearted as ever had turned her head away from the final catastrophic moment as the exiled Arazi tried to do what all of his kind had failed to. She had been close to the man after their travels, or closer than Artemio himself had ever mustered. If she were fighting competent opponents they would have leapt upon the opportunity, but she was not. These peasants knew nothing of warfare beyond bar-room brawls and made a poor showing. How they had slowed the Arazi at all, Artemio could not have guessed.

His concerns were focused elsewhere. Orsina had just committed the very act that he had feared she might be capable of. Consuming the life-force of a living creature to feed her shade. It was somewhat tragic that it had been her childhood friend that he had hoped might assist Harmony in applying emotional pressure to her and ending her rampage, but otherwise he would she no tears for Kagan or his pet.

For a moment, all was still, then the fighting resumed. He and Harmony were a few strides apart, being set upon by what felt like every peasant in the city. They had left a bloody trail all the way here from the palace, but both were beginning to falter. His own strength had never truly recovered after the loss of his hand, and he seemed to be dwindling ever more now that his connection to Harmony had been cut.

Orsina pulsed with power now, her shades freshly fed, a new trick learned to quench her endless thirst for life. He could feel it wash over him, over the city, and it was like a beacon. Every shadebound still living must have felt it, but it was not for them. It was for the shades.

Turning about himself in a lull between haphazard attacks, Artemio opened his senses fully and felt them all flowing by. Every shade in Espher had been called here now by whatever vacuum was at the heart of Orsina. They were beckoned by the promise of all the life that she contained, and they were lured inside of her like sheep to the slaughterhouse. As they came down upon her expecting an easy meal, her own shades reached out and snatched them, making them a part of the vast amalgam that now grew too vast for her mortal vessel to contain it.

Orsina's head lolled back, an expression of bliss writ upon her features.

With a parry and a swift thrust he dispatched another cultist, even as the next charged in, bellowing, "There is only one king and his name is death!"

The first few times it had been a most impressive battle cry, but now it was beginning to wear thin, given how utterly every one of them had failed to deliver him to this one king.

Harmony was making far swifter work of her foes than he, she must have left near twice the number that he had managed scattered through the streets, and of course she had, he was used to relying upon his own shades for assistance in battle and calling upon them now would risk draining the very last of his life away. Wrinkles marred his hands, and if he had found some reflective surface, he suspected he would see someone much like his father looking back at him now.

The last of the true dragons descended upon Orsina. Following the same trajectory that Yelena and Kagan had plotted. And just as the first dragon had been wisped away into nothingness, so too were theses. The tail of the plunging formation tried desperately to pull up when it became apparent that nothing could make its way through whatever force was protecting Orsina, and some even managed to pull level before her shades lashed out once more, fed with the souls of the living and empowered.

The burning air turned ice cold in an instant as Orsina's power swept out from her body to encompass them all. The dragons in the sky were caught, but so too were the cultists who had been fighting him. Where they had stood now only dust remained.

Beside him, Harmony staggered as the hulking opponent she had been crossing blades with abruptly departed, and she looked about herself in dismay. So many people dead in an instant, and Orsina was not even trying.

She took her opportunity, calling out, "Orsina!"

It did not seem to gain her lover's attention.

Another wave of shadows washed out from the girl, passing over the Volpe twins where they stood. It should have killed them. Turned them into naught but dust and a meal for the amalgam shade, but it did not. Because there was a shade entirely devoted to their protection, and Bisnonno Fiore, the last Volpe King of Espher flung himself into the shade's path.

For one glorious moment he was as great as he had once been, a giant of a man, protector of all the land, holding back the tide by his will alone, and then the amalgam tore into him, shredding his ermine cloak, cracking his crown asunder and the taking those parts of him that had once been human and absorbing them into their mass.



The wave pulsed out of Orsina once more, and once more Artemio's own shades reared up in answer. Each one of them caught in the same barbed net of disembodied hands and torn away from him.

When the final wave came, he had nothing left to throw between himself and death. He had not a single shade still bound to him. He was as useless as any common man might have been in the face of this waking nightmare.

The shadow passed over him and he braced himself for death, but it did not come. Fiore was a part of it now, and Fiore would never allow a Volpe to come to harm.

Ashes were drawn by in the wind, burning embers turning to motes of blackened snow as they came into Orsina's sphere of influence. Silence hung over the city.

Harmony staggered forward once more, old and exhausted after the day's trials. "Orsina, you don't want to do this."

At last it seemed that the girl at the heart of the blossoming shadows could hear her. The expression of satisfied bliss faded from her face, and she turned to look upon Harmony with a vacant stare.

"Orsina, please stop! I love you."

The empty dead face of Orsina fractured. The death mask that had been forged in place of her face softening into an expression of great sorrow. She tried to speak but the words would not come. The same shades that enveloped her were tangled about her throat in a viny snare, tightening as she resisted their hold. "I..."

The words would not come, but in her eyes Artemio hoped that his sister found some solace.

Harmony reached out to her. Orsina pulled free of the entangling shadows to reach back. And the shadows leapt forth.

In an instant Harmony vanished from sight, the relentless stream of shades flowing out from Orsina completely blotting her out of existence. The buildings behind her shattered and crumbled, all across the city in one great line as far as Artemio could see. Then as abruptly as the shadows had poured forth, they were stoppered once more.

He rolled his shoulders to loosen them, then stepped forward. "You must be stopped, Orsina. It is my hope that there will be no hard feelings as a result."

A sound like nails upon a chalkboard vibrated through him, down his sword arm, up his spine, echoing in from all sides. It was her laughter. "You are powerless."

"It certainly does appear that way." He conceded, strolling closer, judging his timing and his distance.

“No more wars. No more kings. No more dragons.” The blissful smile had returned to her face. Some vision of the future that only she could perceive replacing the rather tawdry reality that they stood in. “Only peace. Eternal peace. Within me.”

“And you don’t feel that people might object to being consumed to be a part of that peace?”

“Resisting the inevitable. I am the end of all things.” Her smile looked strained for but a moment before the accumulating shades poured some fresh vision of utopia into it. “And after, nothing. Peace. Nothing. Forever.”

“I must stop you, I’m afraid. Much as the peace of the grave does appeal sometimes, there is still too much work to be done.”

“How could you stop me?” The awful laughter again. Artemio’s eyes felt wet, and a brief brush of his cuff showed that they were bleeding. “Shadebinder without a shade?”

“That is where you are incorrect, I’m afraid.” One more step towards her. Close enough now that she was almost in striking distance. Fiore within her would prevent her from tearing his life away, so he only had to contend with the more direct applications of her power. “You may have taken those shades bound to me, but not all of the shades that I can command.”

“Riddles. Always you spoke in riddles. Trying to prove how much more clever you are. How much better. As if clever could stop me.”

“While you may have accounted for my personal shades, and those within confines of Septumbra, I’m afraid that there is a final great shade within the city of Covotana that remains unaccounted for.” He reached out, letting the dried up thread of a connection that he had once nurtured slowly fill up with his life. Letting the flow of it down deep beneath the earth go from a trickle to a flood. The last red hairs upon his head turned white. The muscles still clinging to his bones began to wither.

“So many wasted words when you could be pleading for your life.”

With a strength born of desperation, he readied his blade. “I’m afraid that you have not accounted for The Fire Below.”

It was a fact commonly known by the citizens of Espher that Covotana had been built upon the top of what had once been a volcano. It was a fact known only to those students of the House of Seven Shadows that a Great Shade dwelled down there within the volcano, strangled of energy so that it could not become overly excited.

Artemio excited it now. All of the life that he had left to give, poured down into the shade, and the shade, all those miles deep beneath him exploded into action.

It had been millennia since the volcano beneath Covotana had gone dormant, but dormant did not mean dead. It meant waiting.

From beneath Orsina the explosion tore up through the earth. Molten stone, pressurized throughout its long journey to the surface, now bursting out in a great plume of burning death. All across Covotana the lava began to burst through the crust. The palace collapsed into the depths of the volcano's now gaping maw first. Then the houses of the wealthy and powerful, then the rest. In one slow ripple, the whole city began to fall into the jaws of the earth and burn away.

Orsina had already killed thousands, but those few that remained Artemio sacrificed, wishing that he had her trick of stealing lives so that he might have fed them into the Fire too. Lingered Arazi, thunder lizards too slow to have made their escape, citizens or enemies, everyone.

When the eruption came, it was swift and catastrophic. There were no words to describe the sudden rush of heat burning the air above it away. The lava below leaping up to fill the suddenly empty space that seemed to be beckoning it. The weight of stone made liquid, leaping up to consume them both.

Orsina's shades could not let her die. She was their anchor to the world of the living, without her, they had no foothold. Yet it seemed in the explosion that was rising from beneath them, even the vast powers of her shades had met its match. They swept down, abandoning her tiny pale body, and plunged down into the earth below, the chill of the grave and the fire at the heart of the world fighting for dominance.

She was cast down on the burnt earth, hands pressed against it, as though she could hold down the coming eruption by the strength of her arms. Curled over on herself with every shade abandoning, hair all burnt away, body quivering with the power that had flooded through her, Orsina looked like nothing so much as an abandoned baby lying there as Artemio approached.

He had not closed the distance, before the battle beneath them began to turn. Solid spikes of chilled basalt jutted up from beneath their feet, a crown of dead stone thrust up out of the ground all around them.

Still the volcano pressed on. Around each jutting spike, the lava began to erupt, first bubbling out in thin streams, then flooding across towards them. The chill aura that surrounded Orsina was enough to hold it off at first, but it did not take long before the sheer weight of molten stone overcame the cold air and the circle around her began to close.

Beyond those standing stones, all of Covotana was aflame. Those parts not already collapsed into the volcano's mouth were burning and melting to become a part of its contents when the crumbling stone beneath them sloughed off.

Beneath them another explosion rocked the ground, sending Artemio tumbling and stumbling towards where Orsina still knelt in supplication. She raised her head at his approach, eyes wide and terrified. Artemio believed that she knew how this had to end, but she lacked the means to enact it herself. He took it upon himself to help her.

With the stump of his missing hand, he took her under the chin, raising her up until her arms were fully extended. And then with an awful slowness born of exhaustion and a desperate need for precision, even in this final moment, he drove the Volpe family sword down by her collarbone and into her heart.

He wondered if she might have thanked him, had she the breath in her lungs. He wondered if she might have cursed him, the way Harmony surely would. There was so much in this world that he would never know. So many mysteries that he had never even encountered, let alone solved.

The shades lost their anchor, and the lava rose unrestrained to consume all.

## 24 - The Remains

Caldo, Regola Ultimo Re 1

Covotana was wiped off the map in a single night, but that did not mean that the city herself had vanished. Smoke shrouded it on the first day, and all attempts by the survivors of the catastrophe to enter were thwarted by the still flowing lava that had supplanted the streets. It would be yet another day before some brave souls ventured past the crumbled and melted remains of the city walls to see if there were any survivors, or more pressingly, any materials that might help the survivors who had escaped before the city was destroyed make it through a few more days.

It was only luck that they found Harmony. Only luck that beneath the soot they did not recognize her. The name Volpe was not currently being spoken in any kind tones, given that the family had presided over the death of the kingdom.

A week would pass, with some kind soul pressing sips of broth to Harmony's lips to keep her strength up. Some old half blind woman who was more turtle than human by this point in her life. There were a great many soup kitchens like hers dotted around in the commandeered tents that had once belonged to the nobility of Espher. Inherited by those that survived.

A month passed all too quickly. Supplies shuttled in from nearby villages, a fraction of what they were accustomed to turning over to Covotana for trade. Caravans arrived, and feeling sympathy for the people of what had once been Espher, they turned over their goods to them almost at cost, earning them many lifelong friends and many more marriage proposals.

It helped that Harmony had only been displayed to the public in dresses and finery. They could not recognize her in the more common shirt and trousers that she had always preferred to wear, and if there were those who looked on her red locks and had their suspicions, they kept them to themselves, because the old woman was as good a worker as anyone could hope for and had the courage to go deeper into the City of the Dead where none but the mad dared to tread, coming out not only with the supplies that were so desperately needed, but also keepsakes and trinkets that families had thought lost. Little things that nobody else would have even thought to rescue.

Slowly but surely, the stone had cooled, the Fire Below, slipped back into its endless slumber. Perhaps if there had been a shadebound about, they might have been able to rile it up again, but those magicians seemed to be in short supply nowadays. All dead in the war or fled far from the city carried in the arms of their spirits.

Yet the reputation of what had been Covotana was not of a safe place to go venture, just because it was no longer aflame or afloat on a vast pool of magma. The footing was uncertain, the fragmentary remains of the buildings prone to collapse without any rhyme or reason, but mostly, the spirits of the dead were what put the fear into people.

Even months after the fall of Espher, people would not enter it by night, claiming that they saw specters roaming the streets and dead dragons in the skies. It was a haunted place, a vast sepulcher in which all the dead of three nations had been laid to rest in graves aflame.

Yet still, the old woman who had once been known as Harmony returned to it again and again. Even when the sightings became reports, and the reports became warnings, and the scavengers who had once roamed the ruins became too afraid to risk it when there were so many other prizes just as sweet to be plucked from the fields of battle beyond.

Harmony wore a saint's sword on her back, but there was no mistaking her for Agrantine, even if such distinctions no longer mattered. She wore it more as a talisman against the dead, even though everyone was sure that a woman would have had no idea how to swing such a thing if it did come down to a fight.

And despite all the dire warnings, it was under the cover of darkness that she went back into the city one last time before the last caravan heading away from it packed its bags and made off for pastures new.

She did not want her new friends to see her cry, if she did come to tears, and she did not want to have to deal with their dire warnings about shades abounding.

That night she travelled along her well tread paths through the city, dipping into what had once been the canals before they had been filled with basalt rock to avoid the worst collapses blocking her path. She went on as the night dragged by and the full moon rose, into areas that nobody had the courage to explore except her. Not the palace which had been picked as thoroughly clean as the cowardly scavengers could muster, but the other ancient building with just as long a history. The place where the war had ended.

Vast spikes of stone jutted up out of the surface, unexpected and exotic additions to an otherwise flat expanse of settled and cooled lava. Rows after rows of them, like the curved teeth of some nightmare beast rising up from below to bite down on them all. Harmony pushed such thoughts aside. She had faced real monsters; she did not need to imagine any.

She stood upon what was doubtless her brother's grave and she shed no tears for him, because there before her, cast in stone was Orsina. The lava had risen up around her, even as her shades had fought to keep her from burning, and drip by awful drip it had landed on her skin and sealed it off from the world. And there, thrust into Orsina's heart, was the sword of

her ancestors. She reached out to touch it, half expecting to find it still warm, but it was not. There was an awful chill in it that shot up the length of her arm to her elbow before she could pull her hand away.

A shiver ran up the back of her neck, and despite herself, she whispered, “Orsina?”

But the statue, or the shade of her lover, gave no answer. Only one thing told her where to go and what to do next, and that was the voice of instinct gnawing at her hindbrain. Telling her to run.

The air all around her was filled with motes of frost, and slow forming snowflakes despite it being midsummer. The shades that had been summoned to Covotana by Orsina still seemed to be coming from all across the world, all of them feeding into this one courtyard of desolate stone. To this one spot.

Harmony could not see them, just as she could not have seen them when she wore her blindfold in the House of Seven Shadows, but she could feel their presence. Like a breeze, like a draft blowing through a barely cracked window, just a tickle of awareness as they all flowed by her and into the statue where it remained still and silent.

Feeling like a sentimental fool, Harmony bent down to press a kiss to the statue’s cheek, then she succumbed to her screaming instincts and turned to depart. To leave behind this place that had once been a city, in what had once been a kingdom. What had once been her home.

And if she felt the weight of a gaze upon her as she walked away. She could pretend that it was only her imagination.

The End