

Thronebound
The Last King 3
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13 - The Piper Paid

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

From atop the palace, Kagan might have had the best view out over the surrounding plains, but it would have served him poorly. As night fell over Covotana and the time drew near, he found the softness of his bed overwhelming, like he were sinking down into it and being swallowed whole. On the nights like that he had endured before he would simply have gone to Yelena and laid by her side, but this night she hunted far to the east where the farmers still labored and livestock still grazed.

He was alone in the city. Isolated from Orsina by the guards that the king had placed around her, as though anyone in the world was fool enough to take a swing at that girl of his now. So he did what he had always done on the night before battle, and he walked among the soldiers.

The city herself was packed to bursting with the refugees of the coming invasions, spilling out beyond the walls into the carefully organized camps of soldiers and mercenaries that Espher had brought to bear. They were not packed atop each other like an army would be if left to its own devices, latrines dug next to camps, next to fires, next to armories, they had been deliberately spread wide in a vast loop about the city, far enough from the walls that the peasants cramming in could be contained but not so far that a trumpet sounding could be missed. If he had his way, Kagan would be down there amongst them, far from the weight of stone all around him, but if anyone saw him trying to sneak through the city gates this night, he'd have been hung as a traitor trying to carry intelligence to the Arazi. He was trusted only as far as he could be seen, and no further.

So instead of touring among the soldiery on the ground, he found himself mounting the walls of Covotana, the once white stone now patched up with whatever could have been found in the panic of reconstruction, in some places sloshed over with whitewash to conceal its new arrival, in others left bare as a testament to the frantic pace at which the masons of the city had done their

work. Everywhere it was reinforced, and everywhere lay great barrels of water, ready to be sloshed out the moment that anything caught alight.

“Bad idea.”

Some barely pubescent in a helmet and wispy moustache turned to answer and startled.

“Bloody hell.”

“Don’t fret, boy, I’m the exile. If I was with the Arazi you’d already be dead.”

For some reason that did nothing to drain the paleness from the boy’s features. If anything, he looked a little more queasy than before. “The one on our side. Right.”

He did not seem entirely convinced of that fact, but neither was he fool enough to press the issue.

Kagan gave the barrel a kick as he passed it by. “The water, it’s a bad plan.”

“For the fires, isn’t it.” He scratched his cheek against the shaft of his spear, trying not to stare at Kagan, and making himself all the more obvious for his fleeting sideways glances.

“Dragon’s fire will ride on water and spread further; you need to douse it with sand.” How the Arazi had been defeated by Espher’s armies when they didn’t even know the most basic of things eluded Kagan.

The boy looked bereft as Kagan started his walk along the wall, calling after him. “They didn’t give us any.”

“Better not catch fire then.” Kagan chuckled.

Along the walls of this great city, nothing was much different. Green new recruits with barely a moustache hair between them, playing at being soldiers, giving the appearance of a defended city when the casualties of the past wars had depleted Espher to the point that it was a wonder some bandit hadn’t declared himself king and strolled right in. Kagan knew that Espher’s strength had never been in its force of arms, but he was still shocked at just how little military power it truly had to bring to bear. For all of the debates and arguing among the nobility that he’d forced to sit through he had assumed that the armies of Espher were vast and fearsome.

The individual forces that the different lords had brought to bear in the fields beyond the city, they were slightly more impressive, but they were fractured. What one man had trained his men to do, the next man would laugh at, what passed for discipline in one of these tiny armies would have made the midden diggers of the next weep at the chaos. The armor that they wore was even more piecemeal than that which the Arazi cobbled together for themselves. This was not a

kingdom well prepared for war, no matter how clever their king might think himself to be. Tactics and tricks might win battles, but they did not win wars. Numbers did, and Espher didn't have them.

All of this time, they had kept Kagan away from Orsina as much as was humanly possible, and now he understood why. If he'd known how dire the situation was, he'd have scooped her under one arm, jumped on Yelena's back and left this whole mess behind them. Now it was too late.

Yet even looking at the pitiful display of military might all day long had done nothing to put a damper upon the morale of the Espherans. Letting his senses sweep out over the city, there was anxiety, of course, but the bone deep dread that they should have been feeling just wasn't there. It made him want to shake them, pick them up and shake them, until they realized that they were all going to die here.

They had faith. In their leadership, despite all of history telling them that they shouldn't, but more than that, in Orsina. They thought that she was some fairy come to grant all their wishes. Scare all the monsters away.

Idiots.

They had no idea that they were putting this massive burden on a slip of a girl with enough already loaded on her shoulders to break an aslinda in two. All it would take was for her to make one mistake, and their whole world would come tumbling down.

At the periphery of his empathy, Kagan felt something familiar. A mind that was not a tangled mess of emotions, but an arrowhead of focus. A predator's mind. Dragons.

"They're coming!" He bellowed at the top of his lungs, scaring the nearest guards from their stupor.

He took off running, already feeling Yelena's excitement flooding through him. This was what she'd been waiting for. Ever since they came to Espher, she had been spoiling for this fight, for a chance to show what she could do now that she was fully herself again after her long imprisonment. He felt her launch long before the sound of her wingbeats could reach him. Felt her elation as she swept down over the roofs, tiles scattering off in her wake.

All that he could do for his part, was to move in synchronicity with her will. He ran the length of the wall, into one of the towers, up the spiral of stairs past guardsmen and fresh faced

recruits, all the way to the open platform on top where the king in his wisdom had placed a great crossbow ballista, as though anything so clumsy as a bolt had a hope of hitting a dragon in flight.

From there, all he had to do was jump, once onto the ballista's frame, again onto the battlement's top and once more into the open air beyond the wall where Yelena's swooping ascent brought her by at just the right moment to catch him.

Whatever he thought of the Espheran armies, he couldn't deny their craftsmen did good work, he slipped into the harness on Yelena's back and locked his heels in as easily as slumping into a seat, a whole rack of javelins lined both sides of her like the spines of a thunder lizard, stretching as far as his reach along either side, lowered the closer they were to him to maximize his field of vision. Dragon and man as one, hearts thundering in time, her battle-lust flooding through him, his hands aching to take up one of those spears and launch it into his enemy's heart.

Down in their camps the thunderclap of Yelena's wings had stirred all the men from their rest and they scrambled for bows, slings, crossbows, whatever they had been offered as a dragon-slaying weapon, as if they'd do more than scratch an aslinda's ventral scales.

It mattered little. Men in motion were a harder target than men asleep, so at least this was some progress.

Without the day's thermals to lift her, Yelena had to beat her wings hard to gain some height. They had expected an attack by daylight, when the enemy dragons would have had the advantage of the same rising air to support them. To attack by night like this, it spoke to Konus's desperation, or to a deliberate attempt to circumvent Espher's expectations. He had underestimated their king's paranoia.

He could feel Orsina in her chambers where she sat awake, she must have known that the Arazi attack was here at last, but she did not move, she did not rush to her station. For an instant, the clash of Yelena's hunger for battle, and Orsina's stillness left him completely disoriented, then he closed his heart to her. If she would not fight, then she would not fight. He was not going to be the one to ask it of her.

Above the thin layer of cloud cover, he could feel the coming of the dragons as acutely as if it had been broad daylight and he was staring right at them. They meant to strike by surprise instead of overwhelming with their numbers and power.

He would take that surprise from them.

Yelena unleashed a stream of flame up into the skies above them. The heat of it rising, parting the clouds, showing the Arazi sneaking like cowards. Her wings straining to bring her up in reach of them. Catching on the tail of the rising heat to launch herself up all the quicker.

Him and Yelena against all the armies of the Arazi, as it had always been. He could feel her pleasure flooding through him. The rightness of this moment. His fingers closed around a javelin haft and he took his aim.

The dragons above took a dive. Wings snapping in tight against their sides so that they could drop like stones. Sparks and smoke already trailing from them. Making their own cloud cover as they came.

He held back the javelin until the strain of his throwing arm was singing and then finally when it would have been harder to hold it than to throw, he loosed.

The falling bullets of the dragons were smaller targets than when their wings had been outstretched, but there could be no glancing blow now, no hole punch through a wing that would do no more than sting.

When his javelin hit a dragon with all the strength of his arm behind it and all of the speed of the falling dragon coming down, it pierced deep. Splitting scales and striking deep.

With a roar of pain its wings flexed out. Its wingtip striking off the next dragon beside it, setting both of them corkscrewing out of formation, colliding with more of their kin and sending them spinning out too.

The rest of them flew by, gravity giving them no hope of slowing to face the enemy among them, and then suddenly, Kagan and Yelena were behind their lines instead of meeting the charge head-on.

He could feel her elation sweep through him once more. They had the advantage now, of height and surprise. He threw, again and again, picking off the stragglers that they'd knocked out of their dive, one by one. Piercing through men he'd once called brother and pinning them to their dragon's backs.

Any other day, his heart would have been breaking, but this was the war that had always been coming and they had chosen to side with Konus against him, against his girl, his family. There could be no quarter for them.

Down below, the shadebound of Espher finally showed their hand.

Their armies were worthless, their keeps, easily conquered, yet throughout a thousand years of history Espher had persevered in the face of enemies on all sides. Because of them.

The first wave of descending dragons were hammered, as though they'd run into a solid cliff-face instead of the elemental storm rising to meet them from all along the walls and amidst the camps. Every one of them, capable of burning as bright as Orsina, every one of them finally willing to spend their lives for the glory that they could win.

Despite the hell unleashed upon them, the dragons were not stopped. Espher could call the dead to their aid, but a dragon was so much more than a specter. So much more than a memory being clung to from ages past. They were alive, vital, more alive than anything else in the world, and they would not succumb to the chill of the grave so easily. They answered the magic with flame, pushing back against it, even as their kin rained down around them.

The dragons that had been knocked from the sky in their first clash with Kagan were down on the dirt now, screeching and flailing as the mortal men around them came with axe and sawing blades. They crawled over the downed dragons like ants, every man avenging a lifetime of fear. They were nothing compared to the dragons, but in that moment, they were the ones with the power, and they would never let the balance tip back.

Wings were ripped, scales pried off. The dragons spewed their venom, prepared to incinerate all who set upon them, but the soldiers, the humans, they did not even seem to care. As the dragon tried to close its jaws, to spark the flints lodged by its venom glands, it could not. Spears were thrust into their open mouths, piercing deep into the leathery flesh. Splaying the jaws open, unable to shut. Venom pooled. If they lit now, they would set their own heads ablaze, but if they did not flame then they would suffer death by a thousand tiny cuts. Some chose the sudden blaze of glory and flame, some died ignominious deaths with none brought down with them. But all died.

With a roar of triumph, Yelena spread her wings wide. Hanging between the moon above and the dead below.

She was so lost in the bliss of their victory that she did not hear the whistling approach of another dragon until the fire was upon her.

It was not the beautiful wash of flame that spewed forth from her jaws, or even the concussive blasts of great venom gobbets expelled. It was a blinding bar of light. Punching clean through her wing where the muscles rooted. The pain, it wasn't instant. It should have been.

When a hole suddenly burned right through her, it should have hurt right away, but instead there was just the sudden absence of sensation instead. She didn't even bleed. That was how hot the Prophet's fire burned.

In that moment of no pain, Kagan thought that Yelena had slammed the doors between them shut so he would not need to share in her pain, but there had been no time for it. Neither one of them felt the pain. Only the fall.

Around and around they spun, Kagan's hands were still in motion, still seizing javelin after javelin, launching them up at Konus as he came into sight. He was the one who had taught Kagan to throw, he wasn't going to be taken as easily as the easy prey they'd faced that night. Only once did a throw fly true, and with a brief flash of blinding light it was burnt away to nothing.

Konus closed his mouth like a coffin being snapped shut.

When they hit the ground, and Kagan knew without a doubt that they would now, it would hurt. The pain that they were missing now would come and it would wash over them, and in truth it might be enough to carry them off. But if it didn't they had the ants to look forward to. He was just another Arazi to the brave men of Espher, in the dark of the night, they would know no different. They would be butchered like the animals that he had spent half his life hunting.

Kagan did not know which of the courses on offer he would urge Yelena to take. The carving block or self-immolation.

There was still a knife at his belt, and the scales beneath his chin were thin enough that he might make a single cut and end their suffering before either option became necessary. They could leave the world on their own terms. At least that would be theirs.

Whatever they took from us, we have lived.

The Prophet fell from on high. Plunging down with all of the speed that Yelena's frantically splayed wings tried to deny. When his claws bit into Yelena's scales, the pain came at last, sharp and burning. Driving out all thoughts. Yelena snaked up to snap at the bigger dragon's throat but found no purchase. With wing-beats as steady as if they were merely taking a turn over their territory, the Prophet slowed their fall, evened them out, brought them level.

Kagan went for his knife then, not to take his own life, but to take another. To give all of this meaning. He leapt from the saddle to cling to the Prophet's leg, wedging his own clawed fingers

between the thick scales, and using them as hand-holds as he climbed up and up, around the curve of the beast's chest towards Konus. Towards his father.

This was the end he had longed for. Not his own destruction, but the death of the man who had poisoned the Arazi. The man who had taken free people and made them slaves. The skies open above them, but the choice of where to fly narrowed down until there was nothing left but his course.

A javelin took him through the shoulder, just as the Prophet's flame had burned through Yelena's wing. He had scarcely caught sight of his father before he was falling once more, landing atop Yelena's blood streaked back and drawing from her a groan of such pain that he cursed himself.

The javelin was all that saved him from the fall, hooking in Yelena's harness before he could slide too far. Yet before he'd even hooked a foot through the straps and get his own hold, he was trying to pull it loose. Every tug on the blood slicked length of bone sent fresh agony washing through him, setting Yelena convulsing below him, but he would not stop. Not until it was out, and he could fight again.

When Konus landed atop Yelena's back, it was as gracefully as a cat. Even as she heaved and twisted to be rid of his dragon's grip, he barely slid about at all. Riding with each buck and twist as though he'd been born to a world where the earth was forever in flux.

Get him off. Get him away from me. Don't let him touch me. He is poison!

"Kagan, you would fight your own people?" He spoke their native tongue with none of the accent of the clans, so neutral it was unsettling, as though he were not one man but the amalgam of them all.

"They aren't my people." Kagan spat back in Espheran still struggling with the javelin. "You saw to that."

Crouching down beside him on the dragon's back, Konus reached out to help. "Exile was the mildest punishment I could grant."

Yelena roared beneath them. Kill him. Kill the liar. Cut out his tongue. He tore us apart. He sent you away. He stole us from each other.

"You should have killed me then, when you had me in your power." With a wet sucking sound, the javelin tore free. Konus tossed it aside, and for a moment all that Kagan knew was the

awful pain, then he came back to himself, snarling, “They aren’t my people, because you twisted them to serve you.”

Konus let his sorrow show on his face. Pity for his wayward son. It was one of his best expressions, so many hearts and minds had been won over with it. “They serve only the quest.”

He is not your father; he is the father of lies. Kill him now. Set our people free.

“Your quest.” Kagan lashed at him with the knife but came nowhere close. Strain though he might, he did not have the strength to pull himself upright and give chase. Even pulling himself halfway up to sitting had brought darkness sweeping in from the periphery of his vision. “Your story that you spun to trick them.”

Konus showed his empty hands. As though they made him any less deadly. “It is all true.”

We tried to talk to him. We tried to tell him. We warned him he was going too far. That his quest was making our people twisted. He would not listen then, he will not listen now. Only killing him will set us free. The skies are chained until Konus lies dead. Buried beneath the earth he loves so much.

Kagan fell back, straining for breath. The javelin had torn through scale, skin and muscle, but his breath came clean without the taste of blood. Everything vital had been avoided. “True or false, you had no right to destroy our people. To make them your slaves.”

Actual tears pooled in Konus’ eyes. “Should I have let the world die instead?”

Let it die. Let everything burn, so long as Konus is first on the pyre.

“The world doesn’t need you to save it.” Kagan roared as the world spun around them. Up became down, left became right. Even for one practically born to the saddle, it made his stomach turn over.

He held a hand out to Kagan, as if there were any chance that his son would ever trust him. “If not me, then who?”

The world existed since the beginning of time with no Konus to save it. It does not need him. None of us need him.

Another concussion rocked them as they flew. Shadebound magic or dragon’s venom exploding, Kagan could not have said. It was enough of a blow to make Konus hook a toe under Yelena’s harness.

“The world doesn’t need you. The world doesn’t want you.” Kagan snarled. “You’re a monster.”

“You are a slayer.” Konus’s dragon roared in time to his plaintive wail. Tears flowed freely down his face now. “One law I laid down for our people. Only one. Man shall not kill dragon. And the moment that my back was turned, what did you do?”

He sent that dragon for us. He made us the enemy of all. If we had not fought, we would have died. Would he have had us lay down and die? Is he so desperate for obedience. If his quest is so righteous, why does he need to kill and torture people into following him?

Kagan’s voice cracked, but he put it down to the pain. “You left us no choice.”

“And you leave me with none now.” He walked to the closest of his dragon’s claws as he wept. “I wanted you to know, Kagan, that if you ever set this rebellion aside, I will still be waiting for you. I will still love you. All that I need you to do, is submit to your father.”

Never.

“Never.”

Konus did not seem surprised, or even sad anymore. Just resigned. “Then... goodbye.”

He took hold of his dragon’s leg as it loosed its grip on Yelena. Then both he and the Prophet whipped away out of sight, carried up on the wind, while the earth took hold of Yelena once more and she fell tumbling back down.

Kagan had seen nothing of their journey, with eyes only for his father, but now he saw that they had not been carried far. They had been hauled across the skies above Covotana until they were almost to the wall, but now they had been unleashed. A living battering ram, meant to bring the battlements tumbling down.

Yelena beat her one functioning wing frantically. Trying to slow their roll through the air, trying to make their velocity just a little less terminal. It was of no use. A dragon’s wings were meant to work in harmony, not alone. There was nothing she could do. Nothing Kagan could do. Nothing but cling together and brace themselves for the end.

A foot from the wall, they stopped dead.

Orsina stood atop the wall in her nightgown. Her shade held Yelena in a cradling grasp. Kagan struggled to draw a breath. To shout out a warning. This was a trap. Konus had used them to draw her out, to put her in harm’s way.

The Prophet wheeled above them, turning to make another pass.

Beyond the walls, the city burned. Dragon-fire had swept along the thoroughfares, preventing the movement of troops, and the cheaper parts of the city, closest to the walls, were entirely

ablaze. It left Orsina standing there in silhouette, as visible as if she were out there in broad daylight. Kagan managed to croak out. "Orsina! Run!"

For a moment it seemed that their eyes met, and he saw on her face a contemptuous sneer that had no place on that sweet young woman's features. Her lips moved, and if they were not connected heart to heart, he would have had no idea what she was saying over the roar of flames and the screams of battle. "A dragon does not run."

The Prophet plunged down towards her, its jaws opening, the blinding white light in its throat burning brighter than the sun before it was unleashed.

All that Kagan had time to do was scream before the pillar of blinding light came down on Orsina. Blazing so bright that it would be hours before he could see again without the shadow of it traced down the center of his vision. He felt the heat of it this time, first on his own skin, then on Yelena's and finally, terribly, on Orsina's.

The heat surrounded her. The chill of her wraith the only thing keeping it from consuming her. He could see her inside of the light, like a shadow being cast from far away. He could see her raising her hands up, even as he could feel the white-fire blackening them and crisping her skin away.

Still she did not let Yelena fall.

With a sudden thunderclap, the whine of the dragon's pillar was cut off, and Orsina was still there. Still standing, though her clothes and hair were gone, and her skin was one great burn. Whatever force animated her body, it was greater than the damage that had been done to her. However hot that fire had burned; she burned brighter.

14 - Visitation Rites

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

Orsina had not seen the end of the battle for Covotana. She had not seen the Prima of the House of Seven Shadows rallying the shadebound of the city. She had not seen the dragons retreat in the face of that new stolid defense. She had not seen Konus retreat, thinking the fatal blow was dealt, nor Kagan and Yelena being carried back into the city atop the shoulders of the soldiers.

In her chambers, in her tower, the apothecaries flitted back and forth through the dim candle light. Applying tinctures and poultices. Pouring stinging boiled wine over her. Changing out her sheets as she bled through their bandages. Kagan and Yelena were there in the periphery of her mind. She could feel their wounds being tended. Feel their pain. Kagan's shoulder burned, but not nearly so fiercely as his shame. His wrath.

It did nothing to help her.

She was not in pain, though she clearly should have been from the damage that was dealt her. The apothecaries did not speak to her as though she were a person any more, only like she was a task that they had to endure until its inevitable end. They couldn't understand how she was alive.

Kagan's emotions boiled over time and again as he was tended and stitched. Shame that he had let Orsina be hurt. Shame that he'd needed her to save him so badly that she'd ended up in harm's way. But fury had no clear anchor. Konus was its focus, but there was no single place from which it had sprung up. It seared him, set his muscles twitching, tore him from his rest and onto his feet to pace. It infested Orsina just as surely, but she did not have the luxury of movement to help abate it.

Through all her convalescence all that she could do was wait. Wait for the next stinging balm to be applied. Wait for them to open the curtains and unveil the true horror of what was left of her. She would wait a long time for that one with no satisfaction.

She would wait for Harmony the longest of all. Torn between wanting her there, and wanting nobody to see the state that she was in.

Somewhere deep inside of her, she could remember being a frightened child, devoid of all power, feeling a fever rise and knowing the sickness would come but having no means of staving it off. It was just a spark of fear, but it seemed to enrage the shades within her. Mother Vinegar

would never stand for her girl to die. Rossi did not know the meaning of surrender. The dragon was the worst of all. Its wrath was worse even than Kagan's. The Prophet's white flame had burned her, and she had no opportunity to strike back. It could not abide this. Laying down to die like charred cattle. It was not prey; it was the hunter. It would not let this be.

And still nobody came. Time dragged so slowly, pinned there in the space between life and death, the windows shrouded, the candles extinguished every time that her carers left the room, so that the touch of light on her skin would not pain her.

She almost craved the pain. The numbness that the doctors ascribed to the terrible heat of the Prophet's breath killing those parts of her that could sense. At least the pain would have made her feel alive. Instead she lingered on, with only fleeting sounds and half caught glimpses of motion on the periphery of her vision.

A shade. She was a shade. All the living world passing her by while she was only a memory. Even Artemio would have been a reprieve from the silence.

Yet it was none of her so called friends that came to see her as she lay there burned, it was a maid. Armida. The one who had led her to meet with the peasant uprising. The one who'd treated her like a human being. "How're you feeling?"

The room was pitch black, and Orsina could not see her at all, only hear her breathing in the silence. When she opened her mouth to speak, she did not feel pain, but the scabbing that covered her face cracked and leaked. "How long have I been here?"

"Just a day or so." She sounded hesitant. Was she lying? Had it been weeks? Months? Surely, they would have just let her die by then. "It's been bad out there."

It took time for her thoughts to swirl into recognizable shapes. Not because her mind was a tangled mess of intermingled souls, but because she had been lying here for so long with no thoughts whatsoever. "The refugees?"

"Even them that had a place to sleep have got nothing now." Armida crept closer through the shadows. Not close enough to touch, or close enough to even breathe on Orsina where she lay, but close enough that some part of her could recognize her presence. "Half the city went up in flames."

"My fault." Orsina would have wept, but she did not know that her body could anymore. There was a wetness about her eyes, but most likely it was the product of her blinking splitting her open all over again. "Should have stopped them."

“Ain’t nobody blaming you, miss. Dragons are going to burn things.” There was a crack in the girl’s voice, and Orsina couldn’t help but wonder what had made it. Whether it was the memory of the dragon’s fire pouring down on her home because Orsina hadn’t troubled herself to help, or if it was the sight of what that same fire had done to her. “That’s what they do.”

The burden of her guilt bore down on her with more weight than the wet sheet laid over her to preserve her dignity. “I didn’t fight.”

The maid made another choked up sound. “Surely looks like you did.”

She had to confess her sins. If she was going to die here lying in this bed, then they needed to know why she had done what she’d done. She had to make sure they understood, it wasn’t spite or malice. “I... I stayed back. Let the soldiers and the shadebound face the dragons alone. I... I was trying to make Artemio fold. Trying to make him...”

“Trying to do right by all of us.” Armida reached out to take her hand, then flinched back before her work calloused fingers could touch the bare flesh robbed of its skin. “We know.”

It made no sense. “You know?”

The maid chuckled. “Ain’t never alone in the palace. Always someone listening behind a door in case the king calls.”

She didn’t understand. If she was laughing, then she didn’t understand. Orsina had done this. She’d caused all of this. If she had just gone out, she could have faced Konus, led him away, saved everyone. “I should have fought from the start. Could have...”

“You didn’t do nothing wrong.” Armida had tears in her eyes now, but there was a fierceness to her words that surprised Orsina. She had no idea that there was such passion in her. “King might try to blame you, but the people never will. We know why you didn’t come. We know it was all for us.”

It did not hurt to turn her head and look the woman in the eye. Things tore, liquid flowed, but if damage was the price of passage, then she’d pay it. She’d been paying with her own destruction for everything that she’d done since leaving the forest, why should this be any different.

“The... the people... the ones you took me to meet. Do they still... do they still believe that I’m...” She struggled to put what she was trying to say into words now that she could see the horror on the maid’s face. There were no mirrors in this chamber. Little enough light, even if there had been. But in her expression, Orsina could see how badly she had been burned.

“They’d follow you anywhere.”

Orsina took a ragged breath, gathering her scattered thoughts. “Tell them to take care of each other. Tell them... take care of the refugees. Whatever they need. Try to help them.”

The tears were flowing freely down the girl’s face now as she looked down at the ruin of Orsina. “We’ll do all we can.”

“I think I need to sleep now.” The darkness was already dragging her down as she said it. The tumult of shades within her clawing her back down.

If Armida said goodbye, she never heard it.

The world came and went. Darkness and light flickering by each other, almost imperceptibly different to Orsina as she lay there bleeding. Always bleeding, but never dying. All alone with her thoughts. With her shade that ever more spoke in her own voice. That was becoming her as surely as she was becoming it.

The apothecaries came infrequently now. The care of her turned over to servants, who touched her with reverent hands. Turned her and cleaned her and tried to force broth past her lipless lips. She did not need to eat, not anymore. All of her strength was drawn from a different wellspring now, but for the sake of the people trying so desperately to help her, she tried to choke it down.

When her eyes opened to candle-light but she had not been disturbed by the sponges and sizzling tinctures it startled her almost entirely awake. She forced her head to turn, and was amazed to find that her skin no longer cracked open with the motion. Her skin was pulled too tight across her, trying to keep her in place, but the more that she pulled the looser it became. Elastic despite its toughness. She wondered if this was how Kagan had felt when he first grew scales.

Artemio was there, seated by her bedside, scribbling away in some leatherbound book. He glanced up at her motion, but he did not stop his writing. Waiting, as was his way, for her to speak first.

“I didn’t fight.”

He still did not look up from his book. “You did not.”

The silence hung heavy in the air for a time as she gathered her thoughts, finally grateful for his patience. “Are you ready to make a deal?”

He sniffed, eyes skimming over her. “What use are you to me now?”

She tried to laugh but managed only a splutter. “Some use. Or you wouldn’t be here.”

He caught her eye then, and she saw him calculating. Weighing her worth. “You are healing, slowly. Perhaps by the time that the main force of the Arazi armies arrive, you may be able to sit up and watch as they massacre us.”

“Have you purged all your traitors?” There was a wryness to her voice that she did not recognize as her own. But there was no longer a dragon or a ghost within her that she could blame. They had become her, and all the parts of her that had been her alone had faded into them so smoothly that she could not even remember what it had been like before.

He managed a smile. “With the exception of my dear sister, all opposition seems to have been curbed for now.”

“I want...” Her voice cracked as she tried to draw breath and found the skin around her ribs resisting. “Their land.”

Artemio’s eyes narrowed. “I beg your pardon?”

“You took their land. Their homes. Their money. When you got rid of them, it went to the... crown. I want it.” She hoped that it was clear enough, that there was no ambiguity or wiggle room. He’d told her that the only way to help the poor and homeless of Espher was to do so under her own power. To conjure up houses and lands for them to occupy. He’d implied it would have to be a work of magic. This wasn’t. It was an act of power.

After a moment to absorb her words, Artemio snapped his book shut and leaned back in his chair. “That is a not insubstantial demand.”

“You want me...” She drew in another ragged breath. “To be your queen. Nobles, they have land.”

He stroked his chin, where a beard might have been, had he been fully grown instead of scarcely a man. “If I were to turn it all over to you, yours would be the richest house in all of Espher. It might very well cost me the loyalty of those who were the traitors allies, hoping that it might pass to them when their loyalty was more thoroughly proven.”

“I’m... worth it.” She forced her face into a smile that felt more like a rictus. “Worth more than all of them.”

His brows had drawn down. “You have no family, no servants, no knights, what would you do with all that land? All those houses?”

“My business. Not yours.” Let him stew on the mystery for a change. She was tired of always being the one on the back foot. It wouldn’t be long before her plans for all the houses and lands became apparent.

Despite the heft of her demand, she couldn’t help but notice that Artemio had not departed. He was considering it. That was all she could really ask. “And in exchange for the most expensive gift in history?”

“I’ll fight. I’ll marry you.” She had not ever tried to be flirtatious, and while she was technically nude beneath the sheet suspended over her, she was not feeling particularly capable of it now. So she offered him honesty instead of anything more tantalizing. “Everything you want.”

“I already explained to you that the engagement was only...” He flushed, trying to explain. She cut him off dead. “You want me.”

Despite the dire state of her body, his eyes did dance over her. “I can assure you madam, that I have no designs upon your person.”

“I don’t mean lust.” She cut him off. Under no illusion that her current appearance could interest anyone beyond those attending town fayre freak shows. “I mean, you want me... as queen. Mother of powerful children. Enough power to make all your enemies... think twice.”

She could almost hear the wheels spinning in his head. He’d obviously considered this before, because he considered everything, but to have it offered up to him like this without any need for manipulation was like interrupting a complex waltz with a morning-star to the knee.

“I shall have to weigh my options, it isn’t clear if you will make it through the day, let alone bear my heirs.”

She pushed herself up onto her elbows. Glancing down only briefly to see the dire state of her flesh. Ridged and molten scars coated her. Red raw in between the raised parts. She dragged her eyes away before hysteria could take root. “I... will live. If I haven’t died yet, then I won’t.”

“You shall have to give me some time to consider this proposition...”

She cut that off too. “No I won’t.”

He gawked at her for a moment. “You cannot seriously expect me to...”

“You know what I’m worth to you.” Orsina managed a soft smile, though her lips were as crusted and twisted as every other part of her. “You wouldn’t be here otherwise. Make the deal.”

He fell back on his forced politeness when it seemed that honesty was not sufficient. “This is not how royal marriages are typically arranged.”

She actually laughed at that. “Nothing... typical about either of us.”

“What of Harmony?” He spoke softer now. “She loves you.”

In her chest, it felt as though her heart had grown heavy as a stone. She knew that Harmony loved her. But she did not truly know if she returned that love, or if she had been so caught up in the elation of being loved that it had not crossed her mind to question whether it was requited. Hurting Harmony would be the hardest part of all of this, harder than even the burns. But she was not living for herself. She was not doing what pleased her. She had a higher purpose than that. “Nobles don’t get to marry for love. She’s the one who taught me that.”

His gaze dipped down to the ground. If he wanted absolution from Orsina, she could not give it. They would both have to deal with the repercussions of this arrangement. Both the practical and the emotional. “I do not feel that was a lesson that she truly wanted you to take to heart.”

Orsina pushed all thoughts of Harmony aside; all thoughts of the shape that her future would now take aside too. “Yes or no.”

His eyes darted from side to side, as though there were some physical contract in front of him that he was reading. Beneath his white streaked hair, his precious mind was trying to find the flaw, the trick that she was pulling, but he could not. Because there was no trick. She was offering everything freely, holding nothing back.

Yet still he hesitated, stuck trying to predict every outcome. “How can I be certain that you will uphold your end of the bargain once you are the most powerful landowner in Espher?”

She scoffed. “Have I ever lied to you?”

“My meaning was more that you may not be physically capable of...”

She held up a hand to stop him. “Kagan has been trying to get to me. Trying to bring me to Yelena. Right?”

Artemio shifted uncomfortably. “We have had to dissuade him from moving you.”

“Let him in. Let him take me to her.” She was not looking forward to that particular reunion. To feel all of Kagan’s guilt thundering against her like a drumbeat. “I’ll heal. I’ll be ready to fight again.”

“And how can I trust that you will not simply fly away once in their care?” For a moment, Artemio was no longer a king. No longer a man, even. He was a little boy sitting before her,

afraid of being left all alone. She understood now. All that had been taken from him, time and time again.

She reached out towards him before she could stop herself, and he took her hand in his, though it must have disgusted him. “You stopped me from running once before, do you remember? You said that the only way I’d be able to understand who I am, what I am, was to stay. That hasn’t changed. Everything else might have, but that... that’s the same.”

He gave her hand as firm a squeeze as he dared. “I saw the value in you, even then.”

“You were my friend, Artemio.” She snorted in a very unladylike manner. “And we can be friends again.”

When she squeezed his hand back, a smile crept across his face that had nothing to do with manipulation, and everything to do with the soft joy that came from having someone care about you. “I think that I would like that.”

She took her hand back carefully, trying not to leave a glove of her fresh grown skin in his hand. “And don’t worry about Harmony. I’ll talk to her. When things are settled.”

He settled back and rested his hand atop his book once more. “I must admit, I am surprised to find you so willing to enter into this arrangement.”

She met his level stare once more, and she let him see her without pretenses. Let him see who she was beneath it all. “We all do what we need to, to reach our goals.”

“Indeed we do.” He nodded his head in agreement.

“So?”

“I accept your offer, my dear Orsina.” He smiled once more, somewhere between the official one that he used for others and the genuine one she had caught a glimpse of. “I know that you marry me for purposes other than the romantic, but know that I will do all that I can to make a good husband for you.”

“I can’t promise I’ll be the best wife.” She was still trying her best not to think of such wifely duties as she might have to endure. “But I’ll do what I can to make this work.”

“I expected no less from you.”

His smile faded into darkness as sleep took her, unexpectedly once more.

The next time she came to, Kagan was there. Tears streaking down the scales of his face as he looked at her. She reached out to him like she were a baby and he scooped her up in his arms

as easily as if she were. Through the touch of his skin, she could already feel the life returning to her body. Where his hands rested across her shoulders, the gnarled mass of scars smoothed.

With the life, came his feelings. She could not accept one without the other. The grief that he felt that he had let her come to harm. The shame that he felt that she had to come running to his rescue and ended up hurt as a result.

He had seen her burned before. Carried her listless body through the Selvaggia back to Mother Vinegar when dragon's fire had swept over her. They were repeating their history, but while the first time, Kagan had been torn over whether he should put her out of her misery and rid the world of a dragon-slayer, now Yelena had given him a clarity of purpose. Her voice echoed through both of their heads. Bring her to me.

Through corridors and up endless stairs Kagan carried her. The ache in his shoulder the only thing that either one of could feel. It had been stitched shut before he could reach Yelena, and it had healed wrong as a result of the interference. It would ache each time he used it for the rest of his life, but he still had strength enough to carry Orsina, so he considered it a necessity.

"I've fixed everything, Kagan. I've made it all right." She mumbled into his ridged collarbone.

He held her closer. Voice rumbling through her. "Of course you have. You always do."

Hurry.

Orsina could see no reason to rush, this was the best that she had felt in days. Yet she could feel Kagan's arms begin to shake and the huge muscles of his chest begin to wither. She understood that the new strength that she was feeling flooding through her was his strength. Yelena did not fear for her, she feared for Kagan.

At the top of the spiral staircase leading up to the roost, he fell. Not once had he faltered but there at the very edge of safety the strength had finally left him. When Orsina crawled free from beneath him, he was so shrunken and withered that he could have passed for a human. She could see his bones protruding beneath his scales and his skin. The gap between each rib indented. Finding her feet, she took one staggering step towards Yelena and the bottomless font of life that she represented, then she stopped.

She would not leave him behind.

Crouching down, she hooked her hands beneath his armpits and dragged him forward. Withered as he was, he had so little weight to him that it scared her. And from that fear sprang

new strength. The shade that she had set loose on the world when she wanted her bidding done was inside of her now. It was her. And her arms could lift with all the strength of all the dead inside her too. She need not drag Kagan, she bent lower and hefted him up onto her shoulders, stumbling and staggering on. Out into the open night air. To where Yelena shone like a beacon.

Come to me!

The three of them all fell together, entangled in limbs and wings and the sharing of life. It flowed between the three of them in a cycle. Passing through one, then the other, then the next. Purified at each step before it was returned to its source and started anew. Kagan blossomed back into his fullness. The scar tissue fell from Orsina, sloughing off as fresh healed skin rose up from within. She was alive. They were all alive. And they would remain so. Forever.

15 - Gods of War

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

When the Agrantine came, the earth shook with their passing. A thousand feet stamping down as one. A thousand more in the rank behind. The sky above Covotana turned from the brightest blue of summer to midwinter's clouds, thick and choking. An unnatural smog that blotted out the sunlight and left the peasantry staring studiously down at their feet so they could avoid thinking of what was coming.

From one side of the horizon to the other was filled with their black shrouded forms. An army without compare, too large to even consider using the roads, instead trampling and flattening everything in their path. The traps that had been left in their path had made no impact upon their numbers. An assault by the Arazi had no impact upon their numbers. The shades that had been raised to run riot through the land, slaughtering the living, had no impact on their numbers. There was nary a scratch upon them.

Beyond the walls of Covotana, the armies had swung about, fallen into their formations, readied themselves in whatever ways that they could to face so impossible an enemy. The walls of the city were lined with shadebound, ready to unleash hell at their king's command. In any other war, the fact that they had but a fraction of their foe's forces would have been less dispiriting, but against the Agrantine and their saints, the Shadebound would exert little pull. The most powerful weapon in the arsenal of Espher was blunted.

All of Art's preparations had been put into place, every part of his great plans exactly as he'd laid them, and it would all count for nothing in the face of their raw numbers. They were not the Arazi, they would not come and dash themselves on the walls, they had a legacy of siege-craft stretching back as long as they'd had a standing army.

And every part of that ignored the most imposing part of their force. That menhir of metal carried on the backs of men that contained their god.

Harmony did not know what he was. She didn't know if he was a god, or if there was just some magic to him that she'd never heard of, but she feared it. The others had heard whispers, they'd read legends, they knew of the God Emperor of Agrant through hearsay, but she had seen it with her own eyes, and she could not make any sense of it.

When Artemio stepped up beside her, she still could not tear her eyes away from the distant ziggurat. He might have been king here today, he might even have been king tomorrow, but a king was a man and whatever lurked out of sight amidst the legions of Agrant was something else entirely.

“I don’t think you have enough men.”

Art chuckled. “The thought had crossed my mind.”

“So what do you mean to do?” She glanced to him then and saw that he looked much as he had before all of this began. His face was more lined, the hand that he rested upon the top of the battlements was the only one that he had, and the hair atop his head was streaked through with white all over, but no longer was he forcing some regal bearing onto himself. The stiffness was gone, and with it some measure of the sickliness that she had thought a product of his injuries rather than of his mind. He even wore one of his old suits instead of the glamorous robes of a king.

He shrugged his shoulders. “What anyone does when they are going to lose a war. I mean to make peace.”

“You think that the Agrantine will listen to reason?” She didn’t laugh in his face, but it was a near thing.

“No. Most likely not.” He turned from the army arrayed against him to look at her. “Which is why I am not going to offer them reason, but sentiment.”

“Appeal to their kind hearts? I think that might get you killed even faster than telling them how much smarter you are and that they should listen.”

His brows drew down a fraction. The crow-feet by his eyes growing deeper. “You sound like father, I do not think so little of the Agrantine.”

“The Agrantine are marionettes controlled by their emperor. They walk to his drumbeat; they breathe when he gives them leave to do so.”

“They are just men like any other, and I do not think that they’re beyond reason.” The look that she was giving him should have quite clearly conveyed how wrong that she thought he was, so he changed tact. “Even their emperor is just a man, whatever else he may be. And that means that he can feel, and through his feelings, be controlled.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And how exactly are you planning on doing that?”

Artemio looked back out, as the Agrantine army rippled into new shapes, the straight front line of their formation rippling out into pointed wedges, shield bearers filling them, driving any charge along the length of them towards the crossbowmen deeper in their formation. There would be a saint in each of those spikes to defend against whatever the shadebound brought to bear. The tactics were simple enough for Harmony to follow without a steady lecture from Artemio, but the execution was flawless. They moved like birds in flight. Every step synchronized so that not a moment passed when the changing formations weakened their line.

“I am going to hand that which is most precious to me in the world to him and trust that he will not crush it in his hand out of spite.”

He said it with such misery that it drew Harmony’s gaze away from the display of discipline and back to him. “You’re giving him your crown? You’re giving up without a fight?”

All that he managed was a sad smile. “I’m sending him you.”

She paused for a moment for him to laugh, for him to assure her it was but a joke, yet even in the pit of her misery, she could not simply succumb to destruction without a word in her own defense. “I’m not going out there.”

“He has met with you, and you’ve returned unscathed before.” There was a wheedling quality to Art’s voice that she did not care for, like when they were children, and he wanted her pudding.

“He didn’t know who I was! He didn’t care.” She was taking care not to shout and alarm the soldiers stationed nearby, if only because she had no desire to see out the remainder of the siege in a cell somewhere.

“Then this time you shall have the opportunity to make a better impression.” Even he couldn’t manage better than a tepid smile.

Harmony stared at him, wide-eyed. “You must be mad.”

“Dear sister, there are many here in Espher who would have said as much. Who would have called me tyrant and done all they could to see me torn from my throne. Yet you did not. You saw the faults in me, and loved me the best you could through them, all the same.”

“I wasn’t aware deposing you was an option.” She couldn’t let bait like that slip by without a little snap at it. “I should have done that to start with.”

At least Art could still take a joke. “Whatever else may have happened between us, whatever else will happen in the days to come, you are my sister, and I love you like I have loved no other since the day I was born.”

She feigned vomiting. “Disgusting. Don’t say you love me. That is so weird.”

“In your way, I suspect that you love me too.” He pressed on.

She slapped him in the shoulder, unable to contain a laugh. “Shut up before I throw up over the battlements and splatter some poor knight.”

Yet though he was smiling, he still persisted. “You were able to reason with me, even when my mind was so set on a course that I could see no other. You were able to pull me back from the brink of true wickedness.”

She met his gaze once more, remembering all that he had done, and she sighed. “I’m not entirely certain that I did.”

“I assure you, the worst of what I have done is by far better than the worst I imagined. And that is thanks to your influence.” He reached out his hand to her, and she took it. “Not winning me over with logic and reason, but with your good heart and kind words.”

“And this qualifies me to be the foremost pawn in your parley with Agrant?” It did not suit her to be bitter, she had concluded that long ago, but there were times when the hurt could not be kept from her words, no matter how their mother had schooled her.

“If you can win me over, you can win anyone.”

He was sending her out there to die, and he would die with her. That was some small recompense. Knowing that even when she was a shade, she would not be alone in the world. They would still have each other, even in death. “You know, I would resist more, but in truth I’ll likely be far safer in his camp than in yours. At least no gods are trying to tear his down.”

He squeezed her hand. “Not unless your prayers have been particularly fervent.”

“I wouldn’t know how to do it.”

“I believe it is a simple matter of dropping to your knees and begging.”

“Never been one for begging.” She squeezed his hand back.

“Nor I.”

If she was to die, then she could at least set the matter looming over them to rest first. There was no point in carrying that heartbreak within her, unaided. “You’re set on marrying Orsina? Even though she loves me?”

To her immense surprise he did not draw away, even daring to smile. “I have no intention of placing the needs of Espher above yours, dear sister. That lesson, I have learned. She will be a part of our house just the same as you, and you might spend all your waking hours in her company once the wedding pact is sealed.”

“And what of the nights?” Her stomach turned at the thought of it.

He let out a nervous laugh, but still he did not pull away. “I have little doubt that there will be a great deal of awkwardness for all involved.”

“I won’t share her with you Art. She isn’t some toy that can be taken from my hand.”

“I have no intention of seeking her affections, of that I can assure you. I will do all that I must in public, I will do such duty as I must also, but I know the depth of your feeling.”

The weight lifted. The weight that had been bearing down on Harmony throughout the past day, since Orsina had returned to her, hairless as a babe and remade without any of the scars that she had known. Ever since she had come, and with all kindness and soft words shattered her lover’s heart to pieces.

Tears pricked at Harmony’s eyes. It wasn’t over. “You had better not fall for her. I know how easy it is.”

He cocked his head to the side. “I must say, you seem to be taking this all with much more calm than I had anticipated.”

“Orsina explained things to me.”

He seemed satisfied with that. Letting out a huff of relief. “She told you it would be a marriage of duty alone?”

“Hah.” Harmony’s laugh was no longer bitter but elated. “She told me that we would no longer see each other, except when we had no other choice. That she was betrothed to another now, and she would not break his trust.”

“She did what?” He gawked at her as though she’d grown a second head.

“So imagine her surprise when you explain to her that actually, she can go on romancing your sister.” Harmony brought Art’s hand up to her face and kissed his knuckles. The closest she had come to swearing him fealty. She struggled even to speak. “You have brought me great relief today, Art. Now that I know what your true intentions are.”

There was a slyness to his smile then. “So you’ll go visit with the emperor for me?”

“Of course.” She laughed. “But now that I know I’ll still have a life when I return, I’ll do it with fear in my heart instead of relief.”

The somber mood of the day crept back over them as they stood there hand in hand. The elation that Harmony had felt fading in the face of what she must do next. She was surprised to hear Art’s voice crack with emotion. She was not entirely certain he’d ever let her see him feeling at all before that moment. “Come back to me. To us.”

“Oh rest assured, I will.” She squeezed his hand once more before letting him go. “Try not to do anything too villainous while I’m gone.”

He chuckled. “I can make no such promises.”

Riding out under a white flag of parley, wearing a dress fit for a queen had not featured high on the list of things that Harmony had ever thought that she might do in her life. Facing off against a living god with only her words and wit to protect her weren’t high on the list either, if truth be told. But then, she had never thought that she would be at the center of court, or courting the most wonderful woman on earth either.

The world gave and it took, and knowing now that Orsina was not lost to her, she could not help but feel that nothing she’d lost had been worth keeping and all that she’d found was worth so much more.

It took longer than she had expected to trot along the length of the road, she had become so accustomed to the speed at which Yelena ate up the landscape that a horse at full pelt seemed slow now. Time stretched out too, because she knew at any moment a crossbow bolt might come soaring out from amidst the mass of Agrantine, and she would never know another moment.

She crossed into their range and covered the last stretch of distance to their front ranks in a tense silence. At her approach, the ranks opened up to swallow her, like some vast ocean beast, and like the fool she was, she rode right on down its throat, channeled through their massive army by the opening that they left for her, following that path to its bitter end. Riding all the way into the great ziggurat’s shadow before slipping her heels from her stirrups and dropping down.

A saint stepped forward to meet her. Hairless, black robed, interchangeable with any of the hundreds more. “We shall listen now to your supplication and surrender.”

She glanced from him to the pagoda that loomed over them before awkwardly clearing her throat. “I’m not here to speak to you, actually. But to the man himself.”

“None may approach the emperor.” He declared loudly and proudly.

“Well, I already did, so I guess that isn’t true.”

For an instant he was flustered, then he tried to press on. “You may make your supplication and unconditional surrender to me, and I shall...”

“Listen friend, I want to speak to the organ grinder, not the monkey.”

The man looked stricken. Affronted. Disgusted that anyone might speak to him in such a manner. Then he burst into laughter. Not only him, but all of the soldiers bearing the awful burden of the palanquin too. Everyone uproarious in their laughter. Harmony herself began to giggle like she was a little girl again, overtaken by mirth.

Tears flooded down her face, even the pale palomino that had born her across the field of battle seemed to be nickering in amusement, and that just made her laugh all the harder.

Sometime in the midst of all that laughter, the God-Emperor had emerged from his repose.

“Oh witless child of Espher, returned to me again. Where went your fair companion, that I would have as my bride?”

Atop his palanquin’s platform, looking down at her, he might have been twenty feet tall. If this was the only way that his own people saw him, it was small wonder they thought of him as a god. What luck that Harmony had seen him from the level, and knew him to be only humanly tall, if extraordinary in his girth. “She’s getting married to the king of Espher.”

The god emperor clapped his sausage fingered hands together. “Then two birds shall be struck with a single sling’s shot. My new wife set free, and my enemy laid low.”

“I’m not sure that he is your enemy, actually.” Harmony tried turning the conversation in a less murderous direction.

It didn’t work.

“My people slaughtered. My flags cast to the filth. My offers of friendship, kinship and kindness, rejected with a spit in my eye. All of this, I could forgive. But to kill my wife. My wife! There could be no greater injury. No greater act of cruelty.” The platform shuddered beneath him , and for a moment Harmony thought that his power was shaking the world. But it was not him. It was the people below, shaking where they stood with the burden of his wrath.

“All your brother’s work, and you tell me he is not my enemy?”

It was all that Harmony could do to resist the rage bubbling up inside of her. Even trained as she was to control her emotions, by both a lifetime in her father’s court and her crash course in Arazi empathy, it came close to overwhelming her. Her voice was gruff when she gave answer.

“She didn’t leave him much choice. She cut off his hand. Tried to kill him. Would you just stand there and let somebody murder you?”

He waved a hand, and she was lifted from the ground, drifting up over the heads of his gawking lackies and set upon the platform beside him. Perhaps his neck was starting to hurt from looking down on her. “Regardless of circumstance, he was the one who slew her, knowing who she belonged to, he slew her, and he shall pay the price.”

“Name your price then.” She latched onto that final word with desperation. “We don’t need to fight. We can work something out.”

For a moment it seemed to her that he was actually considering it. That his mind was not already made up, but it was only a moment, and afterwards she would realize that he was merely composing his next soliloquy. “My price is blood. Your fields salted with it. Your streets flooded with it. Every man in Espher cleft from sternum to crotch, guts unwound. Every woman a slave, every child a slave, every heretic necromancer, incinerated. I am no merchant to be bartered with, no dignitary to be appeased, I am Agrant, and none may defy me and live.”

Harmony had hated her father. She felt no shame in saying so. He was a horrid nightmare of a man obsessed with his own delusions of grandeur to the exception of all else. Of all the other people in the world, she did not think that there was a single one towards which she felt such passionate loathing, and now that he was dead, she had truly hoped that she might never taste the bitterness of true hatred again.

It washed through her now. She hated this wannabe god, just as surely as he looked on her as nothing more than a minor annoyance. She was nothing to him. Nobody to him. Yet he hated her and all of Espher with such intensity that it bled out from his skin to infect all around him. This whole army would fight with his hatred in their hearts. They would fight as though everyone they faced was their mortal enemy. There was no question of morale, of conflicting orders and priorities, there was only the emperor’s command, in body and spirit.

Hate so powerful it made Harmony want to shuck all pretense of humanity, to abandon everything she was, and become an instrument of destruction. The emperor was right there in easy reach. She had her blade at her belt, they had not even troubled to remove it from her. One lunge would be all it took, the needle point would slip through his blubber as though it were not there. Hilt to his chest, blade through his heart, war over.

The simplicity of it struck her. The ease. Killing him, killing all of them, she had the skill, the strength, there were only so many bodies they could throw at her. She'd die, and Art would die, all of Espher with him, but the hatred boiling her blood would be quenched. She had to think of something else. Anything else. Anything but this awful, overwhelming hatred. "My... friend Orsina. She says that you care about honor. There's nothing honorable about killing defenseless peasants."

From so close, it was apparent that the god-emperor had no eyebrows, yet there was a twist to the skin above his eyes that suggested a raised brow, even if there were no brow to raise. If he were impressed with her ability to overcome the weight of his passions he would never voice it, but anything that raised her in his estimations had to be a good thing. Still he pointed north to Covotana and sneered, "An army stands before walls as thick as any I've ever raised. They are defended. The incapability of their defenders does nothing to change that. You have raised arms against me once more, and that cannot stand."

With all the strength in her body, she drew her hands up, away from her sword. "If we disband the army, send them home, open the gates to you... what then?"

Once more there was a moment where he seemed to be considering the question, then he began, "Every man in Espher cleft from..."

"Sternum to crotch, yeah. Got it." It would have been impolitic to roll her eyes. Yet still she would not surrender to the inevitability of death. "My brother, he doesn't hate you. He doesn't think that you are bad people, he doesn't want to go to war with you over a mistake."

All around them, the rolling legions of Agrant stilled. As though they could hear the conversation, as though they were waiting for the resolution. Harmony was learning the pattern of it now, the dramatic pause before he made another grandiose statement. "When first I walked this world as a man, I believed in mistakes. In fortune. The rolling eons have taught me better. There is no fortune, no happenstance, only fate, and those with the will to forge it for all."

"So change our fate." Harmony was ready for his grand speeches and emotional manipulation. She might not have had the mind of Art or the warming empathy of Orsina, but when it came to talking, she could do it with the best of them. "Make peace. Show the whole world that Agrant can be merciful. That you are not a monster."

The God-Emperor was stilled, then from deep within him came a gurgling rumbling sound. The great stomach began to heave up and down, the shoulders, the bountiful bosom. His laugh

rolled out over the field, but it was not echoed back to him. “Child of Espher, I am so much worse than a monster. I am a god.”

All hope of a peaceful resolution was gone. Had been gone since before they even began. The tightness that she’d felt about her, the pressure to be polite, it finally released her. “If nothing I could say mattered, then why did you let me come? Why did you let me speak to you at all? You could have had your men shoot me from my horse. You could have crushed me yourself.”

In response to her lapse in manners, he did squeeze her just a little. A pressure in the air. A grinding of the bones. It still felt less like a hardship than pretending to be nice to this bulbous monster of a man. He could kill her, but he couldn’t force her to speak kindly to him.

A smile spread across his face. The first genuine emotion that she thought she’d seen there. His eyes seemed to simmer with barely contained excitement. He was happier to cast off the chains of politeness and morality too. “As you said, honor. It demands that I listen to your bleating pleas for mercy even when there is none to be had. You shall run back to your people, and you shall spread word of what will befall them, and all will to resist me shall be shattered.”

She scoffed. “You think that people are going to roll over and give up when they hear what you’re going to do to them even if they surrender? I thought you were meant to be clever.”

The dark clouds overhead seemed to grow darker, and the nigh comical form of the emperor suddenly seemed like an imposing mass. The shadows all about them lengthened, not because a shade had been called, but because this was how he wanted the world to appear. All was warped by his will, by his presence. Tremors ran through Harmony, vibrating up through the palanquin. “Do not underestimate how terror can unman even the mightiest warrior.”

Fear was in her now, but if he had thought that it would make her back down, he was sorely mistaken. She’d faced her fear every morning when she rose from her bed, and lay down cradled in its arms each night. If fear could freeze her, she never would have moved at all. No fear was powerful enough to stop her. “You know your people are going to die too. We might not be able to beat you, but this isn’t going to be a slaughter. We will resist you. We will leave your army in pieces.”

He cast a glance out over his gathered legions, the saints who worshipped him, the soldiers who had no choice but to mindlessly obey, every one of them had been a person once, a person in their own right, with their own history and family and future, and they had given it all up for

him. He owed them everything, and he gave them nothing. Not even his consideration. With a shrug, he said, “There are always more soldiers. More machines. Infinity is bountiful. Anything that my mind can conjure is out there somewhere, awaiting my arrival.”

And there he had provided her with the perfect balm for the fear he had forced into her skull. The delightful familiar warmth of pure unbridled rage. “Imagine what happens when the Arazi come across your army, bloodied and beaten when you are done with us. Imagine what they’re going to do with what is left of your people. Imagine what they’re going to do to you.”

He laughed once more. Mirthless and rippling. “If you hope to provoke fear in me, a larger cudgel than your dragon-lords will be needed. We saw them off with nary a scratch when you led them to us before.”

She turned her gaze to the north then, to the shadows rising on the horizon. To the dark shapes flitting beyond the limit of the dark clouds that Agrant had carried with it. Each one of those shapes looked tiny at this distance, but the fact that they were visible at all spoke to the prodigious size of the creatures that were coming. Just as they’d feared, both the Arazi and the Agrantine were arriving at Covotana at once. Despite all their efforts to stagger them, to buy themselves time to prepare, both wars were coming to a head this day. She pointed out there to the north, past the city that seemed to cower from the emperor’s gaze and beyond. To the doom that was coming. “Those were a few dragons. I’m talking about their army. Every single Arazi warrior, trained from birth, and every wyvern, terror bird, thunder lizard and dragon they’ve got. With a god-slayer at their head.”

He seized her then, like a child amidst a tantrum, his power wrapping around her like his pudgy fist, hoisting her into the air and flinging her out to the side where she could do nothing but dangle. “Return, oh child of Espher, to your city. Return to your sniveling dregs of a people. Tell them that we come at sunrise. Any who wish to make peace with their own gods, or fling themselves from your walls to escape the coming pain, are welcome to do so. I grant you that mercy. No more.”

“You’re too scared to even talk about it?” She sneered, even as his power compressed her ribs and stole her breath. “That isn’t very... imperial of you.”

He yanked her back to face him, his spittle pattering over her like sea-spray as he lost control of his temper. “What cause have I for fear, who have outlived a million petty kings? You think this is the first barbarian to come down from the north? You do not know of them, because I left

nothing of them to know. All of this is a cycle, endlessly repeating. Kingdoms rise, and kingdoms fall, and only gods remain. Only Agrant persists.”

She could not move. She was trapped inside her own body, in the tomb of his power, forced to look only at him. To think about nothing else. Yet she knew that she could break his gaze despite it all. “Look at them and tell me you have nothing to fear.”

He did. His eyes darted to the side of her, to the distant horizon where the enemy of his enemy would never be his friend. To the dragons that swept down from on high, dancing and playing through the smog he’d tried to use to block out the sun. Making mockery of all his artifice.

“Fear.” He grumbled. “I do not know fear. Only contempt. Now go. Before I turn that contempt upon you and rend your flesh from your bones.”

With a push of his hand he sent her soaring off the palanquin once more. Not to hang and hover as a testament to his power, but to land, staggering by the side of her palomino. Catching at its reins to keep from falling. She hoisted herself back up into the saddle and spat at the churned mud between her and the god of Agrant. “I shall look forward to dawn when we meet on the field of battle, and we learn if a self-proclaimed god bleeds.”

Her only hope was that off to the north, whichever emissary Art had sent out to meet with the Arazi was having better luck.

16 - The Weight of a Heart

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

There was no-one left in Covotana that Artemio could trust, so he went himself to meet with the Arazi. He had Orsina's absolute loyalty at last, but her unique relationship to the Arazi precluded him from sending her, and she was by far too unschooled in diplomacy to be of the slightest help. Kagan might have seemed the natural choice, but he had no faith in the man, nor did his own people seem to care for him. As for the nobility of Espher, they were loyal exclusively to themselves. It made him wonder if the place was worth saving. He had given so much for Espher, and it seemed that he was doomed to be repaid in disappointment.

There had been a great furor at the idea of him riding out to meet with the Arazi, crippled as he was, but as he was quick to point out with all the sharpness of his tongue, he had all the power of the shadebound at his disposal, regardless of the number of hands that he could wave around.

There was some irony in the fact that those who opposed him the most were those most intent upon seeing him survive the day, while those who were complacent were perfectly happy to be complicit in his death. A poet would have had a field day with such material. But Artemio was no poet. The only art he practiced was this one.

Yelena was kind enough to offer to carry him out, her injury swiftly healed once the sealed circle of scar had been meticulously reopened by such surgeons in the capitol as could hold their bladders through all the snarling.

He had politely declined. Though it would have made quite the image, the king of Espher atop a dragon, going to meet the dragon-lords on their own terms, some things mattered more than appearances.

Instead he rode out atop some borrowed horse from Granchio's stable. Out through the army of Espher where the people rose to their feet and cheered at his passing. Some soldiers were boys, younger than even their king. Some were old men, press-ganged back into service by the dire turn of circumstances. Everywhere that Artemio looked, there was terror and desperation hidden behind masks of excitement. Death was closing in on Covotana like a pincer, drawing closer in on each side with each passing moment. Of these men, few would still be in fighting form by the next sunset. There would be widespread death, regardless of how well Artemio managed his armies and tactics. These meagre men would serve as little more than terrain,

pushing and contorting the enemy forces into shapes that were acceptable to Artemio. They would know no glory, they would earn no ribbons, only the cold of the grave awaited them. He smiled at them benevolently as he passed.

Their deaths were a part of his calculations. The grain stores in Covotana and beyond would be sufficient to carry the women, children and a greater portion of the nobility through the winter. The men would have to die to keep things in balance. He would not spend their lives thoughtlessly, as waste was not his nature. But neither did he mean to be frugal with them at the cost of victory. To his mind, everyone on the field of battle needed to be expendable to a greater or lesser degree, and the manner in which their lives were spent would reflect the value that they could provide in death, just as he judged them in life.

The leaders of his noble houses were out there amongst the massed soldiery, dressed in armor beaten out of their inheritance into a shape that might fit them instead of their grandfather. Not a one of them had seen war before Artemio had led them into one, and now they could think of no other way to do it. It was something of an amazement to him that half of these people could lace their own boots, so the fact that they'd willingly give over all command of their preciously hoarded power without a second thought felt like a lesser achievement to him, but still, it spoke to the confidence that the people had on him, on the field of battle at least. It was a good sort of problem to have. Better than being known to all as an excellent peace-time king. At least for now.

The crowd went on parting ahead of him, like they were being tide-pulled into the ditches and tents lining what had once been a road and was now churned mud. He rode on.

On through the ruins of roads it would take them all the summer months to rebuild. On past the crushed wagons and abandoned livelihoods. On over the empty fields where great markets and carnivals had been held on the turn of the seasons. Places that had been full of joy and life, now barren as the Arazi approached.

The Arazi swelled in his vision as he approached.

He had been at the battle of Selvaggia. He had seen the forces that were deployed against him, and he had met them with strategic applications of force until the Arazi had been driven into retreat. It had been textbook perfect, but for a few minor hitches.

This army made that one look like a tea-party gathering. The true dragons were massed at the rear, surrounded on three sides by the lesser flying wyvern, the false-dragons and the terror-birds

capable of flight. Their numbers matched the army that he had faced before, and they were outnumbered five to one by the flightless. Wyverns, thunder lizards, crocorax, feathered serpents, so many of them it boggled the mind, even before accounting for the impossible bulk of most of them. And each one of them, paired with a warrior who had been hardened not by a single winning battle, but by a lifetime of conflict against enemies on all sides. Sharing the intelligence of their counterparts just as their counterparts borrowed a measure of their strength.

Without star-metal blades or deities amongst them, they would be prey to the Shadebound and Artemio and Prima Cicogna had spent many hours in conversation regarding exactly how best to apply the limited force that they had at their disposal. Given their inability to guarantee that there would be any effect upon the Agrantine, their attentions had mostly been turned to the optimal methods of destroying dragons in flight. Now it seemed that there would be other more pressing issues to address. The Arazi did not have siege-craft, and they did not need it. Not when but one of those vast beasts of theirs could shoulder down a city's walls.

From amidst the lines of titanic reptiles, one dragon launched, coming forth to meet him. It rose with slow, heavy beats of its wings, dwarfing many of its own kind in bulk and span. It did not take a genius to understand that this was the mount of the Arazi leader, nor that he himself represented the people of Espher, he supposed. He had not worn the crown for his cross-country trot, fearing it might end up in a drainage ditch somewhere, but the color of his hair was likely distinctive enough for all and sundry to know him as one of the Volpe family, even if the specifics wouldn't have been clear from a distance.

At about half the distance to the enemy lines, it had been his intention to slow and wait, but the longer it took for the dragon in the sky to rise up, the more distance he covered. Stopping now and demanding his opponent meet him in the perfect center could have been read as belligerence, so he carried on, with his heart hammering harder the closer the enemy loomed.

It should have been fear. Perhaps if he'd dug down through his feelings, it would have been at its core, but in the sight of these vast and powerful monsters, bred for war and nothing else, he could not help but feel some degree of elation. They were here to face him. He was the king of Espher. All the world would see him now, as he was, not as the nothing he had pretended to be for his own safety. They would know him.

At almost three quarters of the distance to the enemy lines, he pulled his horse up short to a skidding halt and prayed that it had courage enough not to buck him when the dragon arrived.

That was enough of a concession on his part, enough of a show of bravery for his own troops too. If things did go awry then he meant to be back in Covotana some time today, before the fighting started, for preference. Artemio did not dismount, both because he feared that he may be making a swift exit, and as he was unsure how he'd manage to clamber back into the saddle should he do so. There were many things about his missing hand that he had become accustomed to, mounting a horse was not one of them. Not yet at least.

Kagan of all people had helped him mount up down in the stables, hidden from the sight of his men, more or less lifting him like a child into the saddle. It should have been embarrassing, he supposed, but a king became all too used to people doing things for him. He supposed that the two of them had come to something of an impasse, neither friend nor enemy, and with the wedding to Orsina declared, whatever wedge that the exile had meant to drive between them had been abandoned. That, or he had earned the man's grudging respect by choosing to go and parley with the Arazi himself. Holding tight to the horse's back with his legs and holding one of Kagan's javelins high with a white bedsheet streaming behind it he had ridden out to face his destiny.

The palace had only a single white flag, and it had gone off with Harmony. Presumably nobody among the quartermasters had foreseen a situation in which two armies would need to be headed off simultaneously.

Konus and the Prophet touched down with far more delicacy Yelena had ever managed. The dragon seeming to stop on an inch of grass before pacing in a slow circle, gaze never leaving Artemio. Konus was smiling, which Artemio took to be a bad sign, but he did not say as much for fear that it might poison the negotiations to come. Clearing his throat he called out. "Welcome to Espher, friend Konus."

"And what a welcome we received." The dragon-lord laughed aloud, "Arrows and curses everywhere we went. Poisoned wells. Rotten food. You lowlanders do know how to spoil a place."

Artemio straightened up in the saddle, as much as he dared. "It was my understanding that you come from a barren wasteland, plagued with living nightmares, firestorms and chaos. I wanted to make my honored guests feel at home."

For an instant Konus said nothing, but then he burst out into genuine laughter instead of the forced and boastful one he had faked but a moment before. "Very good."

Arazi culture was more forthright than that of Espher. It was considered good form to show your emotions there, presumably because the empathic abilities that so many of them possessed would render any attempts at subterfuge to be entirely pointless. Even when it was in the presence of an enemy, when a joke amused them, they laughed. There was no guile in them off the battlefield, and for Artemio, who considered every conversation to be a battlefield it was a refreshing change of pace. To his surprise, he found that when he put a smile into place upon his face, it was entirely genuine. "Though you may not believe it at first, I do think that it is good that you are here. Good that we can talk, as men and kings, instead of dealing through intermediaries."

"Always found it to be so, but I am Arazi." Beyond the scales and the bald pate Art was surprised to find that Konus looked almost entirely human in stature. The other dragon lords were massive bulky creatures, but there was a sinuous grace to Konus that matched the beast he rode. "Talking to you in person I can read you like a scroll unfurled before me."

"Then you can be assured that there is no deception afoot."

Konus cocked his head to one side, eyes closed, as though he were listening to the whistle of the wind, but after but a moment, he stopped with a moderately perplexed expression. "How odd."

He kicked his heels into the horse's sides to urge her forwards, but she did not move. Her gaze was locked with the Arazi's dragon, and the two of them seemed intent on ignoring everything in the world with the exception of the other. Oh well, it could not be helped. Shrugging, Artemio asked, "So, with that settled. Tell me, what do you want?"

Once again, the night immortal leader of the Arazi seemed to be flummoxed by the speed at which the conversation was twisting out of his control. "Want?"

Artemio was careful to keep his smile polite, not spilling over into mocking, but he need not have bothered, if Konus could read his heart half as well as Kagan had done, then he'd know that there was no ill-will there. "Yes, you are here for a reason, I presume."

Beneath Konus his dragon growled in harmony with him. "The Witch."

The sound should have made Artemio soil himself, it should have made anyone sane so afraid that they could not even think. Yet he had come out from behind the safety of his walls willingly, so clearly madness had already taken hold. There were still tremors in his legs from his brief time in the saddle. "I assume that you refer to Orsina."

“We come to bring an end to her before her evil.” Konus had been talking just between the two of them, but now raised his voice, bellowing loud enough for his front ranks to hear and carry the jeering roar back and beyond. “So the world can live, she must die.”

Artemio shrugged his shoulders. “That is perfectly acceptable to me. Is there anything else?”

There was something to be said for the spike of power it made him feel each time that it took just a few words to one of the allegedly most powerful men on the continent to twist the conversation around so rapidly that Konus could not keep up. The king of the dragon-lords jaw dropped. “You... you would just give her up?”

Artemio nodded. In all honesty, it was markedly less than he'd anticipated paying. He had expected to have Espher made into a vassal state of the Arazi too and would have had to spend decades maneuvering to have such oversight removed. “If that is the price of peace between our people, then I'd be happy to.”

Konus did not put the spurs to his dragon, but it bounded over closer all the same. It seemed that he needed to be closer to be certain of what he was hearing and saying. “Why aren't you lying?”

He had suspected from the outset that he would have to give up Orsina. He had planned towards that end, even going so far as to use his wedding proposal to drive a wedge between her and Harmony, and to calm any doubts that Orsina might have had about his loyalty to her.

The bottom line was that he was king, and as a king, he could tolerate none more powerful than him within his domain if he meant to maintain his authority. Even the proposed wedding would have been insufficient. She would have become the ruler, and he, her puppet. It was simple enough for anyone to understand. Hence the layers of deception that had been necessary to keep her off course.

As for Harmony. Once the Arazi departed, there would be nobody around to countermand his tale of surprise and betrayal. Dear Orsina, his betrothed, snatched from him so young by an Arazi assassin hiding in wait. He could ride on the coat-tails of that sympathy in court for quite some time. Harmony would have her suspicions of course, but in convincing her that her relationship with Orsina could still be pursued after they were wed, he had made it seem that this was never his intention. “I will be sorry to see her go, of course. We are quite close. But the needs of Espher come before my own.”

Konus had managed to snap his jaw shut again, though it was clearly a struggle for him to grasp how readily Artemio had offered up one of his closest allies as a sacrifice. Perhaps the Arazi really were barbarians unsuited to statecraft, letting their emotions guide them rather than their principles. Perhaps it did not matter. It was Artemio's dearest hope that after this day, he would never have to see any Arazi or Agrantine again for as long as the sun still rose.

Konus nodded his head in agreement. "Deliver her to us, then this war of ours is through."

"Well, there is one slight impediment to that plan." Artemio acted as though he were reluctant to share this news. In truth he was. If he had only one enemy to face then this whole thing would have been markedly more manageable. "The Agrantine. If I hand Orsina over to you, I have nobody to fend them off."

"Their god walks with them." His grip on the dragon's reins tightened.

By Artemio's estimations it would have been over five hundred years since Konus fought the gods of the Arazi. The Burned Ones, as they were referenced as in more contemporary texts. He had fought them, and he had granted them their new titles, and he had framed himself as the liberator of all, because he'd rid them of that yoke. It had been achieved with such panache that the Arazi people did not even notice the new yoke being slipped over their shoulders during the celebrations. Regardless, those hundreds of years ago when Konus had faced off against the gods of his people were in all likelihood the last time he had encountered what someone from such an honor bound culture would consider to be a worthy foe. One that had even odds of destroying him. For a warrior culture, having no means to express one's martial excellence would have been a millstone around his neck. Constantly proving his superiority on the battlefield was the only way for a leader among such people to maintain his relevance, and here he was deprived of any enemies that might be considered a fair fight. He must have been spoiling to go after the Emperor of Agrant from the moment that he heard of him.

Artemio's smile had not faltered throughout all of this. "While I am quite comfortable facing off against an army of men, or indeed dragons, a god requires something in the way of special treatment."

Konus crossed his arms over his chest. The very picture of smugness. "Killing a god is not so difficult."

"For you, perhaps not. But I cannot boast your experience."

It was a difficult thing, to use words and make a friend do exactly what is desired of them. How much more difficult then, to convince an enemy of a course of action. Artemio could not tell Konus what he wanted him to do, or it would be refused. For he was the enemy. He could not tell Konus what not to do, or it might be refused as manipulation. The key was not to win the man over with reason, though it would be all the easier if such a thing were allowed, but instead to manipulate his emotions in such a way that it was unclear that they had even been touched upon. The choice of every word was made to invoke a specific feeling. To inflate his ego, let him feel that he is mighty, but also to slip a needle through his guard and pierce that same ego. The word boast, used in this context, was in no way out of place, but it came with its own meaning. Was he really the man that he claimed to be or was he inflating his own legend? Would he still be capable of such feats? Could he kill a god this day, if he were given the opportunity?

Konus looked past him to the massed army on the southern horizon. To the black shrouded swarm of killers, ready to descend upon Covotana like flies on a corpse. “This is a trouble of Espher, not the Arazi.”

Artemio shrugged his shoulders, accepting this as his due. It was too soon for a commitment. He needed to give Konus an excuse first. A justification, beyond his own desires. “If you would be willing to delay the trade-off for just a short time, then it can still be done within the day.”

Konus’s good humor seemed to have faded now. As had his delight at the twists and turns of their conversation. All that remained was a quiet serious man, intent upon murder. “She is a dragon slayer. She is a monster. The seed of evil. We will not accept any delay. Each moment she walks the world, we grow closer to its end.”

Artemio smiled and let his calm radiate out. “Then if matters are so pressing, I would have to say that it is time for your people to prepare for a fight.”