

Bloodbound  
The Last King 2  
David Estes and GD Penman

#### 4 - The Fallen City

##### *Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112*

The ambassador released Artemio's hand once they were through the gates. As though she had been ensuring that he would not bolt and run before the bar could be lowered once more. Gone were the warm faces of Espher from the guardhouse, the distant rattle of dice, and the indiscreetly concealed bottles of wine tucked away when a commander strolled by on his rounds. In its place, the Agrantine. Every one of them was dour-faced and placid, like cows left to stand in a field. He did not know what it was about life in that southern empire that so stripped people of their joy, but he could not bear the sight of it for too long.

He turned to face Modesta again, the only spark of life among this desolation. He could not say why she was different from them. How her indoctrination into the cult of the Eternal Emperor had diverged from the purging of all emotion into a fully expressive and charming woman. Perhaps it was that she had given herself over to it willingly. Perhaps it was simply a matter of class. After all, he had often found the peasants of Espher to be sullen and hollow-eyed too. She graced him with another smile when she caught his gaze. "Welcome home, Artemio. As you can see, your people have been treated with all fairness in your absence. Does it take a weight off your mind?"

Looking out across the city, he could not explain how it had changed. The buildings were the same. The crowds still thronged the streets, hustling about their business, but the air felt wrong, foreign. Even when they had been rebuilding in the aftermath of the dragon attack, it had not been so subdued. Black flags hung where the royal greens had been the last time Artemio had walked these streets, but they were so small a change as to be barely noticeable. Life went on in Covotana, whether one king or another ruled, but today it felt as though that life was a mockery of what it should have been. As though the dead walked among them.

"This is not my home, Ambassador. Merely the place where my duty has brought me."

There was a carriage waiting for them, bearing the ambassador's livery, and it was almost a relief to climb inside it and look no longer on all that was wrong outside, even if it meant being in close proximity to the one who had made it so. "Do you think, then, the southern reach, what you call the Cut, is truly your home? I can assure you that the people there have suffered no indignity or discomfort either. Those scant mercenaries in your father's employ had long scattered by the time my saints passed through, and those loyal to your kin holed up in their fortress rather than face us with their dwindling numbers. Does that convince you of our good intent?"

"It convinces me that you intend to conquer rather than ravage and that you believe your position to be tenable enough that you needed no display of violence to curb any uprising against you. Though I am certain you shall resort to all manner of brutality the moment that changes." He was far too cultured to roll his eyes at her, but neither was he so polite that he could let so blatant a lie about their intentions pass. If it had been in the best interests of Agrant, she would have had every man woman and child of Covotana flayed alive and strung out for him to see. He had read the histories of their expansion, of the atrocities they had committed joyously with righteous fervor in their hearts.

Modesta did her best to divert him from that line of thinking. "We are not the savages that your father painted us as. We have no wish to harm our neighbors, only to protect them. If your kingdom had allies like us to call upon, do you believe the Arazi would have been so bold in their incursion against you?"

"To be frank, yes. Their attempts at diplomacy looked much like this. The promise of every bully that willing submission will protect the victim from further depravities." Her diversion was a classic one, the kind of logical fallacy that he'd seen so many of his peers fall into. That of the lesser of two evils. Just because one enemy was a threat, the other could be discounted. He had fallen into that very same fallacy when marching off to war, never even considering Agrant when the Arazi were at their door. "In fact, I believe they promised the very same as you. A change in sovereignty with no real difference to our daily life. Their protection against hostilities from the likes of Agrant."

She scoffed. "And you believe they would have upheld such promises?"

"As much as I would believe that Agrant would." His shoulders were shrugged for him as they moved from the packed dirt of the gates to the cobblestones. He could feel their familiar

rattle up his back. “That is the funny thing about sovereignty; the moment that it is given up, ultimate power no longer lies in the hands of whoever sits the throne and instead belongs to whoever allows the throne to be sat.”

“It will be difficult for us to reach an accord if these opinions of yours remain unchanged.” She feigned a pout. It looked moderately ridiculous on the face of so stern a woman. “Would you cut the heart from our negotiations before they even begin?”

“My dear Ambassador,” he forced a polite smile onto his face, “it is my intention to enter into these negotiations with as open a mind as your own.”

There was a momentary lull in the conversation as they both pondered precisely what he meant by that, then Artemio chose to break the silence. “Perhaps you can tell me how all of this came to pass. I assume that your troops departed Agrant when...”

“When news of your father’s passing came to us. Yes.” She clasped her hands over her knee. She wore no sword on her hip, probably feeling no need for one in a stronghold, yet still she exuded competence and threat. As though she might reach out with those manicured nails and slit his throat. “He had always been the most stalwart defender of the south, and with his loss, and your preoccupation in the capital rather than in your own lands, it was clear that the way lay open to us. A full congregation of saints set off north, with the intention to make entry to Covotana when it became undefended. Is this what you wish to hear?”

She had cocked her head to the side, as if politely awaiting a reply. The Agrantine habit of ending everything they said with a question was uniquely frustrating. “So, it was simply a matter of waiting out our army’s departure?”

“Would that it were so simple. No, my messages south are not so swift that I could have hoped for that. It was a dreadful waiting game, hoping that my saints would arrive after you had departed but before your conflict was resolved. Can you imagine my worry that your standard would show over the horizon before theirs?”

“You’ll excuse me if I do not overflow with sympathy for you.” It took all his efforts to refrain from spitting his contempt and another effort to push the conversation forward. “What if we had lost?”

“It was that danger that drove me to call upon the Fatherland’s aid.” She settled back into her seat now, gazing out the window at the passing buildings. Casual, as though her enemy was not seated across from her. As if they were merely friends, traveling together. “Had the armies of

Espher been defeated, then there is no doubt the Arazi would have hewed south next. By fortifying Covotana, we meant to delay them long enough for a countering army to be raised.”

With another deliberately casual motion, she met his stare. “You understand we did not come here and take this city out of spite or to cut your victory from under you. It was duty to my home that forced my hand. Can you tell me that you would not have done the same in my place?”

He sidestepped the question. If she was going to ask them reflexively, it did not mean he had to answer them in the same way. “How was the city taken? I see no signs of fighting, no broken gates or scaled walls.”

“Upon sighting our standard, your king fled the city, leaving only Queen Cadence in his stead.” She might have been lying. She might have been telling the truth. Artemio was startled to realize that he could not tell at all. Without the familiar foundations of history beneath his feet, he found statecraft and the art of deception to be unsettling. “Realizing that it was within her power to prevent bloodshed, she ordered the gates flung open to us. Always she thinks of the people before herself. She is quite the inspiration to any would-be ruler, wouldn’t you say?”

“That or she is your creature through and through, merely awaiting the opportunity to betray us to Agrant the moment the chance presented itself.” He forced a smile. Let her think he believed that when it was only a suspicion. Let her believe a thousand little lies to distort her understanding of him, so that she could not find the kinks in his armor and thrust her envenomed words home.

“I can assure you that is not so. Would that it were.” When she laughed it was rich and full-bodied, completely unlike the affected tittering favored by Espheran women. He felt it rolling over him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention. “My duties in this sinful place would have been all the much easier. Would you believe she would not even answer letters from the Eternal Emperor himself when they were sent?”

“Quite the scandal for some princess from a lesser vassal state, sold off as breeding stock.” He wanted to shock her. To stop the laughter. He wanted for her to take every word he said painfully seriously. She might not have believed it, but he could destroy her.

It did not work. She threw back her head and laughed all the louder. “Artemio! I am surprised to hear you speak so coarsely of such matters. Although please do not take that to mean that I do not like it. You’ve spent time enough among the court, do you know what a fresh breath of honesty feels like to one who has been immersed in pandering and lies for years?”

“Madame Ambassador, to hear you speak of it, deceit is as foreign to you as flight to a fish,” he sniped.

That had the desired effect. Her laughter stopped. All of the jovial conversation she was trying to draw out of him withered on the vine. “Have I not always been honest with you, Artemio?”

“When it serves Agrantine interests, certainly.”

“Then let us find some common ground, so that both of our interests might be served and as such we can both remain honest.” She offered him her hand, not like a mercantile deal, but like a suitor. “Does that seem fair?”

He pressed his lips to her knuckles. “Indeed, Ambassador.”

Seemingly satisfied, she settled back into place and continued with her stories. “With the gates open to us and the guards commanded from on high to stand down, it was a simple matter to secure the city and begin our preparations for attack by the Arazi. The springs that feed the city would of course be imperative in containing any fire that spread, but they would not be sufficient, so we immediately began stockpiling more. Likewise, we have laid on food vastly in excess of the usual demands of the city, in case the dragon-lords left their ground troops to lay siege against us while their nobility journeyed farther afield. The people of Covotana saw in us the security that they were so sorely lacking with all of the armies of Espher drawn away north. Surely you, too, can see that we are your natural allies against such monstrous invaders?”

This sort of blatant deception was almost laughable after the graceful waltzes of words the ambassador usually carried along. Loudly announcing her siege readiness to the opposing commander so that he would lose heart. It was almost as ridiculous as his own ploy suggesting that Espher’s standing army had any sort of siege weaponry available to it. It was a fair trade he supposed. A thrust and riposte.

Still, he could not let the rest of the lie pass by so easily as he accepted her claims that she had somehow conjured up supplies enough to feed both her saints and the city. “If you meant to reinforce us, then you would have marched north, not here. If you meant to be a friend to Espher, you would have fought by our side, not stabbed us in the back. Once more, dear Ambassador, I must ask you to err on the side of truth when spinning your tales. I am not some peasant to be easily impressed with a sack of hardtack and armored men when trouble rears its head. Your saints are ill equipped to face dragons, and you could not have held this city if the Arazi came,

which is why you left the real fighting to us. It is why you have always left Espher in peace. Because you know that our Shadebound are the shield that protects you from the creatures of the wild, and that your stifling religion would not suffer us to live if we were one of your dominions.”

He forced another smile. “Stuck between theology and reality, leaving us in peace, was ever the simplest solution. Might I ask why that has changed?”

“While I resent the implication that we are not here to offer succor to your poor and suffering common folk, I must admit that there is some logic to your statement. And it is for that reason that I have long remained here, advising a light hand and caution to my beloved husband.” Her husband, the Emperor of Agrant, greatest of all polygamists given that every woman of age and rank within his kingdom became his bride. “You understand that neither one of us wanted this outcome?”

“Neither one of you and I, or neither one of you and your emperor?”

There was a moment when he thought she might falter, but it seemed that the oiled gears of her diplomacy were too well made to be so easily knocked out of alignment. “We are one and the same. I speak with his voice. And here in this carriage where prying ears cannot hear, I will readily admit that all you have said is true. So long as we had some control over you, Agrant was content to allow Espher to live free. But were you to become vassals of the Arazi? That would change matters greatly. What would you have had me do?”

Anger flared within Artemio at last. He should have been furious to see his city stolen out from under him, but he was so exhausted from the war that he had taken it in stride, just another problem to solve. Now he was being told that this whole thing could have been avoided? That Agrant had the good sense to leave Espher in its rightful place?

“If all of that were so, you could have trusted in us to do what we have always done. You could have had faith in my abilities.”

“My faith is reserved for my god.” She glanced out of the window once more, solemnity creeping into her expression. “The choice had to be made swiftly, and I do not regret it. Would you have trusted in some unknown general to best the Arazi?”

“I was not unknown to you, Ambassador.” There was an edge of a growl in his voice.

“Wit in conversation and a skill for battlefield tactics do not inform each other.” Her head snapped around, and she returned at least some measure of his irritation. “All I knew was that the

Cerva were placing their trust in your abilities despite all the many reasons they should not. In truth, I believed you had blackmailed your way into a position far beyond your ability.”

She took a steadying breath and then spoke as calmly as if she had not but a moment ago been enraged. “I am pleased to see that it was not the case, and that you will continue to serve as an able defender of these lands. I also appreciate your own faith in my ability to know all, but I am not divine. We mortals must work from the little we have seen and heard, must we not?”

His eyes narrowed at that. “And what was it that you had seen and heard that made you think so little of me?”

“A cunning mind but ambition burning brighter than I think even you yourself know. It is like a pyre, on which all you judge to be your moral inferiors will burn.” She let out an unsteady breath. Almost like excitement. If the subject had been something else, and the situation vastly different, he might have thought it was flirtation. But she was a married woman, of course. Married to a man she likely had never met but committed to his cause with a frightening devotion. Whatever it was, it was over in just a moment, and she carried on. “Quite daunting, I should imagine. Doubtless it served you well as a leader, but if you were confounded by a lack of acknowledgement of your talents, you can see why I might think that it would lead you astray?”

His own reply was quite subdued by comparison. Devoid of all feeling. As he had always been taught to make it. “I have no ambition but to serve.”

“To serve to the fullest of your abilities? To serve as you judge best?” She let a small smile play over her lips as she spoke, treating him to warmth in her gaze that he felt that he was in no way deserving or desirous of. “This urge of yours, to test yourself against the great and powerful. I do not know if it comes from how you grew on the sidelines of high society, if it is a result of your heredity, or if it is simply the only safe expression you had for your natural desire to rule. You cannot even recognize it as ambition, can you?”

Her head cocked to the side as she was rocked steadily, a hint of sunset penetrating the clouds above to glint off it through the window.

“If Espher was best served by another, I would gladly step aside.” He held up his empty hands, as if he were releasing the reins of some invisible horse.

“Once they had proven themselves your better, of course.” She smirked. “Which you would strive against with everything in you so that you might judge them worthy only if they could best

you in every domain you consider yourself to excel in. Silly me. How could I not have seen that as an absence of ambition?"

Artemio shifted uncomfortably. He did not like to think of himself in such terms. He did not like for others to think of him in such terms. There was a danger in ambition. Not for others, but for the scions of an overthrown king. Usurpers would always have to fear the true line's return, and if the Volpe line was to survive, it had to bury any and all ambition. Sublimate it into other pursuits. Proving their worth to Espher, always. Perhaps that was the ambition she spoke of. The desire to prove that he was worthy of the ongoing survival that the world had inexplicably granted him. His father had his bitter war with Agrant, who he blamed for the rise of the Cerva. Artemio, his puzzles, mysteries, and histories. He had meant to make his mind an invaluable tool. A head too full of useful things to ever be parted from his shoulders. "Do you have a point you are ambling towards, Ambassador?"

"It is simple, my dear." She smiled through his rudeness. "You wish to place yourself as a moral authority. To judge all through objective eyes. Yet you are not objective, you are a player in this tale, not merely its observer. You say to me that you would cede your position if it was for Espher's betterment, yet mere moments ago you told me that you would never cede her sovereignty regardless of circumstance. Can you not see the contradiction?"

"Without sovereignty, Espher ceases to be Espher. It becomes a shadow of Agrant dressed in the corpse of what it once was." He was straining to be diplomatic, but there were certain truths even he could not grease. "I cannot... no matter how I may wish to meet you in a compromise that pleases you in our negotiations. I cannot allow Espher to die, whether that death be swift or slow and lingering, with the corpse listing on. I cannot. I will not."

There was nothing but the trundle of wheels over cobbles for a time. The gentle rocking of the carriage in motion, the distant, subdued sounds of life going on. A testament to just how little sovereignty actually mattered to the average citizen. The baker rose before dawn to make his bread, and so long as the flour delivery arrived, he had no care for the land on which the grain was grown or which flag fluttered above it. The truth of it bore down on Artemio as though he were the cobbles beneath the carriage. They didn't care. None of them cared. The wars and manipulation and ceaseless effort that the nobility put into ruling meant as little to them as the rain a continent away. They saw no further than their next meal.

Modesta's voice cut through his reverie. "Each conversation that we share provides me with a more profound insight into your thoughts. Through understanding we shall reach the compromise that we both seek. Is this not the purpose of all conversation?"

"Then I shall endeavor to go on making myself crystal clear." He spoke softly now, not humbled by the truth of the common man, but so incensed by it that he could barely contain his rage. "No compromise in which Espher becomes a vassal state to Agrant will ever be acceptable."

She let out a full-bodied laugh, rich as chocolate. "Do you feel that you have been less than clear in that?"

"I feel that you do not understand it as you should."

"I understand, Artemio. So long as Espher retains sovereignty and identity, you will accept any other compromise for the return of your city." She was smiling coyly when he met her gaze. "Correct?"

It was enough. He managed a laugh of his own. "Not quite. But with those rules established, we might move forward with the negotiations in good faith."

The carriage stilled as she threw up her hands as though despairing. "If there are no further constraints that you wish to place upon me, I believe we have arrived. Was there anything further you wished to demand of me, as your hostage?"

He offered her his hand as they rose. "I shall be sure to let you know if I think of anything, Ambassador."

## 5 - To the Victor

### *Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112*

For all that the city was unchanged, the palace could not have been more different. It was as silent as a tomb the moment they stepped inside. It was too early in the conquest for any of the established families to start sending out forays. They would be secured behind their walls in villas across the city, in their little fiefdoms, guarded by their private armies. Even if they did muster some attempt to sidle into Agrantine favor, it would only be second sons or wives making the attempt. The true decision makers of Espher lay beyond the city walls. The powerful had ridden out beside Artemio with the vast majority of the fighting power Espher's upper class could muster.

For all of the exhortations that his sister had been doling out, no statues had been torn down or paintings shredded. The palace and its furnishings were as pristine as the day Artemio had left. Presumably because the servants had remained behind and no longer had to contend with the dust and filth the courtiers trod in with them. He supposed that the kitchens would be still and silent too, but for a pot or two simmering away. The Agrantine had no delicacies, such decadence was frowned upon. Likewise, the wine cellars had likely gone untouched too. Leaving sommeliers and butlers with little to do but take stock and hope for brighter days. Or, more likely, to indulge in some long-overdue holidaying.

Even the royal colors still hung everywhere Artemio looked. Presumably, the Agrantine felt no real need to make a display of their ownership here inside the palace, where nobody was looking. Out in the city, it was a necessary reminder, to establish their dominance. Likewise, the city walls needed to be seen flying the black, but here, it was presumably a waste of time and dye. Here there could be no question of who ruled, because there was nobody to speak. They passed by one or two of the sword-saints who had taken the city, and each time, Artemio did his best to take the measure of them. They were dressed more like monks than soldiers, members of some holy order whose only iconography was the dull scabbard at their hip.

Their swords were a matter of some interest for Artemio, star-forged steel. Perhaps his interest in them should have been more practical, driven by a fear of being upon the receiving end of one of them, but in truth, it was primarily academic. He had heard folktales of the charms passed down to ward off shades by the common folk in the outer reaches of Espher—not the

tales themselves, of course, but the recounting of them by those throughout history who had sought them out—and of those described by wizened old women who kept such lore, meteoric iron was always spoken of as the most potent. There had been considerably too little academic interest in the subject in Artemio's opinion. Almost as though knowledge of such a thing had been deliberately suppressed and those who had pursued it had been pushed to the side where they struggled even to have their meticulous work published. As such the philosophical cause of why such things repelled shades were barely touched upon. Were circumstances different, he would likely have been begging his captors to draw steel and give him some time to study the devices that allowed them to wound the dead as though they still lived, but at present it seemed impolitic.

They would fight like Modesta, he knew. There was a single school of fencing in Agrant, a single discipline taught by rote to every fighting man and woman. Although fencing seemed the wrong term for it. There was no flair or fancy to their motions. Simply repetition and reinforcement of the same cuts. Over and over, until the memory of making them was so ingrained in the memories of the muscles of Agrant's soldiery that they could perform each of them in sequence without need of thought. Some pursued this "art" further, refining each stroke of their sword and every parry until it took on the look of a beautiful display. Among those, the best became sword-saints, bequeathed one of the blades of their order by one who was retiring or who had expired. Modesta did not carry one of those blades. She was no saint; she was a wife of the emperor, and while it no doubt would have been quite a statement of faith in her abilities were she to be granted one, it probably would not have been well received in a nation so reliant upon shades were a weapon forged to destroy them carried in by a foreign ambassador.

The very first time they had met, Ambassador Modesta had demonstrated her form. Not in some gauche display of martial prowess but as an act of meditation, or possibly even worship, that he had intruded upon. There were few things in life that Artemio would admit had frightened him, but what he had seen in that little courtyard garden played out over and over in his mind, even now. The precise movements, all flowing from one to the next without pause, without mercy. Even if her sword was not infused with any unearthly metal that would let it slice through the power of his shades, it was still a heavy length of steel that would have bent an Espheran rapier in half with a love-tap. Yet she swung it around as though it were weightless. As though it

were merely an extension of her own arm. For all of Harmony's much-vaunted skill with the blade, he could not see a way in which she could best Modesta. Not alone.

Yet she carried no blade now, no longer was she alone with only a few trusted servants in an enemy stronghold. Now she was the reigning ruler, at least in the interim. What need had she for a sword when she had so many skilled warriors in reach of her shout?

When Modesta noticed him paying entirely too much attention to the armed guards, he quickly jumped back to his original train of thought. "I would have thought there would be some of those delightful portraits of the emperor posted up about the place by now."

"My dear husband's picture sits by my bedside, of course, but it has not been our practice to enforce the display of the imperial majesty in conquered kingdoms for many years. They tend to be bottlenecks for dissent. So easy to mar a picture in the dead of night when the courage to strike at the face itself is absent. We remove the temptation and thus protect the foolish from their own excesses. You have some experience of that, I believe?"

"I shall have to update our histories to reflect this change in policy." He did not want to like Modesta. He truly didn't. She had, of course, impressed him in their first meeting, because she was an impressive woman, but the fact of the matter was that for all that they were playing games with words for the obvious dull political reasons, he was beginning to find it fun instead of a chore.

"True power does not require the display of flags or the hanging of pictures," Modesta intoned with mock seriousness. "It is unseen, unspoken, but known by all. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I would, but at the same time, you would have heard no objection from me if all the green hangings had been torn down." He leaned over slightly as though confiding a secret. "I've always felt it made the place look a little rustic."

"Very droll," she replied with a little roll of her eyes. "With the Cerva dethroned, you now feel comfortable enough to make such jokes about striking their colors?"

Back and forth. Back and forth. They quipped and ducked and dodged. Artemio held up his hands. "It is no slight upon the man if his ancestors selected a tone that I personally find displeasing to the eye. But you are quite right of course. I should not be so flippant in these matters. I assume you are leaving their standards hanging because you expect their imminent return?"

That brought their repartee to an abrupt halt. Modesta let out a sigh. “Perhaps this is the sort of conversation best conducted in a place other than the halls?”

Suitably chagrined, Artemio felt a little of his enjoyment in the situation fade. “My apologies once more, Ambassador. You are quite right.”

Yet it seemed that Modesta was not finished bandying with him. Perhaps she had spent too long in Espher, where wordplay was a hobby as much as a necessity. Or perhaps the sullen-faced saints provided little in the way of meaningful conversation. She grinned at him widely, showing him in no uncertain terms that his conversation was welcome. “No matter how often I hear you say those words, I cannot help but savor them. Would you say them again for me, just once more?”

He let out a little snort of laughter before he caught himself. Relief as much as amusement. “Only when you have earned them, Ambassador.”

They were still chuckling when they rounded the next corner and came face-to-face with the queen.

Cadence Cerva had never looked less than composed on any of the occasions that Artemio had met her. Even now, though her red-rimmed eyes widened in shock at his sudden appearance, her expression remained flawless and tempered. Her mouth did not fall open into gawking, and there was no quaver in her voice when she asked, “Am I to understand that Espher is back in friendly hands?”

Guilt washed over Artemio. Here he was cracking jokes with the enemy while his queen was held hostage, completely alone. “Alas, no, your Majesty. I am merely a visitor, here to negotiate the Agrantine withdrawal.”

She continued to have eyes only for him. It was as though Ambassador Modesta were invisible. “I have never known of the Agrantine Empire willingly ceding an inch of territory once they had claimed it.”

“Nor I, your Majesty.” He sighed as he remembered himself at last and dropped into a bow. “Yet here I am, nonetheless, hoping that we might bring this matter to an end without recourse to violence.”

“Violence is the only language they speak, Duke Volpe. They might pretend at conversation, but unless blood is spilled, the Agrantine do not believe a word that has been said.”

After that particular slur against her people, Modesta piped up, just to remind them she was there. “What luck to have met you here, your Majesty. We were just on our way to find you. Would you care to join us for some refreshments and a discussion of Espher’s future?”

Cadence’s voice wavered as she snapped back, “Like a lamb with the butcher’s blade to its throat would bleat for its future?”

She had spent a long and fruitful career as a politician never saying such things. It startled Artemio more than a little, but Modesta just chuckled. “It seems that we have two plain speakers among us at least. No, your Majesty. Rather we shall talk as two butchers with blades pressed to the other’s neck instead. Has nobody informed you that the Espheran army has returned?”

She was thin-lipped as she answered. “I am no longer kept abridge of the latest gossip.”

Artemio made his attempt at a reassuring smile but felt quite certain he had overshot into a pained expression. “The city is under siege and shall remain so until the Agrantine have departed.”

“So, I’ve starvation to face in addition to imprisonment, what a delight,” the queen replied in a monotone.

“I do not believe it will come to that.” Artemio tried to cheer her. “The ambassador…”

Once more, her impatience cut through the carefully cultivated veneer of civility that had been her only armor in a foreign court for all these years. “The ambassador is the pretty face that the monster shows to fool you into complacency. You have been taken in, Duke Volpe. You have succumbed to her wit and wiles. This is not a storybook tale. There is no happy ending for either one of us. Death, privation, and misery are all that await under Agrant’s yoke, and now it is locked upon us.”

He could not let any sign of it show on his face, but Artemio believed her then. She had been young when she came to Espher. Some said too young. But those years before her marriage, she had lived in a kingdom under Agrantine rule. The emperor did not like to overplay his hand. When he could take nations as vassal states rather than conquer them outright, it was his preference. Thus when Agrant and the world at large was mapped, its own borders were markedly smaller than the thousands of miles that owed it fealty. It was a matter of politeness among foreign nobility not to comment upon another’s loss of sovereignty, just as it was ill will to stare at a bald man’s pate. Some matters were beyond the control of men, and for so many, one of those forces bore the golden eye sigil.

Modesta tried to keep up the jovial tone that had buoyed him along through their journey here, but he found himself flinching away from it. Recognizing it for what it was. The nectar that drew the bee in to drown.

“I dare say that the situation isn’t quite so grim. Wouldn’t you, Artemio?”

He presented a placid smile. Remembering himself all at once. “My queen has spoken, and I would not countenance contradicting her. Particularly in a matter where she has a wealth of experience.”

Ambassador Modesta threw back her head and laughed, and for just one moment, Artemio saw through her artifice. He had read in books of people throwing back their heads to laugh, just as he was certain Modesta had. And it was this that she attempted to mimic, not any real-life situation she had observed. There was nothing natural in her motions. In any of them. “So, I am to face two dour Espherans while I play the role of a humorless Agrantine. What dull hours shall we while away?”

He needed time to think. Time to gather information and piece together their next move. Modesta had promised him anything he might desire, so why not simply ask for it? “Might I have a few moments to consult with her Majesty and bring her abreast of the current situation?”

“Much as I would like to grant you this very minor request, I regret that I must serve as chaperone for the pair of you.” She opened her hands as she shrugged. Careful, controlled movements. How could Artemio have not seen before just how false it all was. “I could of course have one of my guards fulfill the same function, but they will then come to me and repeat the entire conversation, so in essence, you would merely be prolonging the matter. Should we not take the path of least resistance?”

Artemio scoffed. “I scarcely think that we require chaperoning. Her Majesty is a married woman.”

Modesta raised a brow. “I believe young widows also require the protection of their virtue by your custom?”

Their procession onwards through the palace had scarcely begun again before that brought them to a dead halt. If the halls had not already been eerily silent, this revelation would have been enough to tear all sound from them as it had torn the breath from Artemio’s body. He took but a moment to steady himself before forcing the words out. “The king is dead?”

The question hung among the three of them for a moment. None of them willing to admit to the well-known fact of the king's twin who swapped in and out of the throne interchangeably. For Artemio, it would have been too much like giving a secret away to an enemy. To the queen, it was a constant impunity upon her honor, so she did what she could to avoid the subject entirely. Why Modesta went along with the mummer's farce, Artemio could not fathom. But nonetheless she did.

When she gave answer, it did little to ease his horror. "I could not say. He certainly is not here. And while I am certain that you will announce the purity of your intentions towards her Majesty, you have form for seeking out her company in private and secluded places in the past. What fun it would be for your king to return after being so rudely dethroned only to find a bastard in his wife's belly. Can you imagine the scene?"

Artemio couldn't even look at the queen, and a red flush leapt up his neck and face, so bright it almost matched with his hair. "I would never..."

Modesta cut him off with a chuckle. As though they were not currently discussing regicide. "Ah, and here come the protestations of purity. Did I not predict them?"

"Fine." Artemio swallowed down his discomfort and embarrassment and turned to look upon the queen once more. For all her certainty that their situation was severe, it seemed that even she could not help but smirk a little at his blush. "Your Majesty, though it pains me, I must ask after the health of the king."

Her smirk faded faster than Artemio's flushed cheeks. "It is... as Modesta says. We were separate when news of the attack came, and I do not know what became of him. He could be alive and well or dead and gone, and I would be none the wiser."

He plodded on to the next confirmation. "And it is true that you opened the gates to the invaders?"

"We... There were no soldiers left to fend off an attack. It was on the advisement of those few who remained in court that I surrendered the city in the hope of dulling the savagery of the Agrantine."

Already she tried to shift blame to her advisors, sensing that he would have taken a different path and trying to defer to his knowledge. She was the queen, yet she gave his opinion more weight than her own. It was ridiculous and a testament to how ill treated the woman had been since here arrival in Espher. She had been kept a prisoner in the palace, passed around like a

common whore by her husband, and treated with none of the respect due to a woman in her position. And so, they were left with this ruler that could not rule.

In truth, given the numbers involved, he most likely would have thrown the gates open himself, gambling upon the return of sufficient numbers from the battle in the north to secure the city. Just as she had. The only difference was that he knew he wasn't an agent working for the Agrantine. "And did it work?"

"There was little violence, in truth." She had pinpoints of red upon her cheeks, not nearly so fearsome a blush as he had exhibited but some sign of shame at least. Was it the shame everyone would expect or the shame that she had deliberately betrayed the nation that had given her a home beyond Agrantine reach? "Some scuffles and a few examples made of the peasantry."

"Is it not exactly as I said, Artemio?" Rich as silk and deep as the ocean, Modesta practically purred as she said it.

"Of course, Ambassador." He didn't even bother to glance her way. This was supposed to be a private conversation after all. "I did not doubt your word for a moment, I only seek to understand my queen's views on the matter."

"A clever sidestep." Her laugh was similarly rich. Like the heavy cream the palace cooks liked to ladle over every dessert. "But forgive me, it was not my intention to intrude upon your private conversation. I am, after all, merely here for the sake of maintaining your decorum. Would you continue?"

The queen snapped at her again before another word could be spoken. "Your presence is the most likely cause of me losing my decorum, madam."

It seemed that they would truly have no peace, and time alone with the queen was exactly what he craved the most in that moment. Not for the sordid reasons that Modesta suggested, but because Cadence was the one most likely to know what had actually happened to the king. Were he captive, the whole siege would be over. He was too valuable a hostage to be traded for only a city. Yet Modesta made no show of him. If he had fled the city as was being claimed, then logic would have dictated that he sought to join the army. Yet there had been no sign of him. At present, Artemio could only fear the worst. That the queen was a widow in truth. Though again, the absence of evidence of the king's death added complications. It would only have made sense to make a show of his death and destroy the cohesion of the army outside. Yet here they sat with

nothing. It was a mystery, and while tinkering with those was usually Artemio's favorite pastime, today he had the burden of a kingdom upon his shoulders.

He wet his lips. "We can return to this conversation later, your Majesty. For now, it would seem prudent to hear what the ambassador proposes."

She still glowered at Modesta as though she meant to burn a hole through her. The enmity there seemed real enough. But if they were both operatives of Agrant and one had trodden all over the long, slowly unveiling plan of the other, would that not have created a similar degree of annoyance? "So long as you are not foolish enough to believe a word of it as fact, I'm sure it will be most enlightening."

They stopped dead in their procession once more, Modesta spinning on her heel, face blank of all emotion but for the little tremor of anger that she allowed to slip through. "Your Majesty, I am shocked and appalled at your implication. Is this how an ambassador to Espher is to be treated?"

Now that Artemio could see all this for artifice, he couldn't help but find himself amused by the ambassador's little displays. She knew exactly what was thought of her, and the fact that it was said so infrequently was considerably more unlikely than the few occasions that it did slip out. There was a chuckle edging into his voice that he had not meant to be there. "It was less of an implication and more of an outright statement, Ambassador. But I'm sure that in the interest of progress you can move past it."

Finally, they emerged into the solarium after what had felt like hours of navigating the corridors of the palace. Where Artemio had first met, and taken breakfast with, the twin Cerva kings.

## 6 - The Spoils

### *Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112*

There were still signs of them everywhere he looked. Even their seats seemed to have been left in the same place, as though they had been occupied but a single moment before. A knife still lay on the table, the one they had used to cut up apples. The last of the daylight peeked over the rim of the horizon, shining in through the windows and bathing them all in its blood-red light. Artemio strode to his accustomed seat opposite that of the kings and sat. The ambassador and queen, less comfortable and familiar with this place, seemed to dither before positioning themselves on one of the king's chairs and a footstool by Artemio's side respectively. It was not right for her to sit there so, as though she were subservient to him and not the other way around, but there was no way to change it now without provoking a scene. Taking a steadying breath, he put it out of his mind.

They were alone now. There was no more need for cowering words. "It seems that the time for tiptoeing around the subject is over. Ambassador, might you inform us as to the location and disposition of the king?"

"As her Majesty already told you, that is unknown at present." Modesta smiled at him. "Do you doubt her word too?"

He didn't say that he did, nor make any implication of it, but he could feel her stiffen at his side. A well-placed wedge between them in only a few words. Modesta truly had a talent. "It was my hope that you or your men might have access to more information on the matter."

"Alas, by the time that my forces arrived at the palace, the Cerva king had vacated the premises. I can assure you that if there was more I could tell you, I would." She gave a little shrug of her shoulders. "But enough about the past. It is time that the three of us discuss the future of Espher and what you mean to make of her. Unless you wish for Agrant to remain in place and maintain the peace?"

Cadence seemed to have softened at Artemio's explanation that his doubt was directed towards her limited resources rather than her person, but her tongue certainly had not lost its edge. "The sooner you depart, the happier we shall all be."

Servants shuffled in with a bottle of wine and glasses, hastily setting them down on the table and retreating in the awkward silence. After they were gone, Modesta resumed from where they had left off. “Let us discuss precisely how that might be achieved, shall we?”

Artemio leaned forward in his chair. “First, I shall go outside and direct my commanders to stand down, then they shall part to allow your army out of the gates. Afterwards, we shall march with you to the southern border to ensure that you encounter no unfortunate incidents. Then, alas, we shall part ways forever.”

“A polite and fitting end to this brief foray onto your sovereignty.” She was all smiles and soft edges. As though the more Cadence pressed her, the more fluid she would become. “Although I do hope that you spoke in error with regards to ejecting me along with the soldiery. It would be quite impolitic to throw the emperor’s wife out of your kingdom. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Alas, I fear that you will no longer be able to serve your function as ambassador with the trust between you and Espher so broken.” He cast a glance sideways at Cadence. She was still and silent for now. Resisting whatever urge she might have had to verbally assault the ambassador. It was only a matter of time before that dam broke. “But rest assured, I shall be happy to give a good account of you to our king and petition for your return. Once tempers have settled.”

“Most kind of you.” Modesta’s smile became more genuine. Except of course, that it didn’t. She knew how to fake a fake smile and her real one. Artemio wondered if that snake had any actual emotions at all or if she was hollow all the way through. “I know that you are not a man to take such promises lightly. So, the question now becomes, what can be done to facilitate our rapid arrival at your extremely practical plan for our withdrawal?”

He clapped his hands together. “You should pack your bags, gather any belongings, and pull down the black banners, then I believe that we are set.”

“I feel you are being facetious with me.” Her smile never wavered. “Would that be a correct assessment?”

Artemio leaned back in his seat with a sigh. “Just tell us what you want.”

It was rude. He knew that it was rude, but he was exhausted, and he was growing even more weary of dancing around her words. If she stated her price, then they could negotiate it down. Provided it was not too unreasonable.

At least Modesta seemed to take his bluntness in her stride. “In truth, what we seek the most for Espher is stability. As you so ably addressed earlier, it is not in our best interest to extend dominion over you, but neither can we tolerate a hostile power on our border when our attentions are needed elsewhere. When the Arazi circumvent you and march on us, do you think we can afford to be worrying about Espher?”

“I suspect an invasion is not the ideal means of acquiring an alliance.” He knew he was meant to be mediating here, as the central point between the fury of Cadence and the supposedly cold practicality of Modesta. Yet there was no escaping the fundamental fact of the situation. She had ordered Espher’s invasion.

Modesta paused to formulate her next answer. Something that was not a lie but gave no admission of wrongdoing on her part. “As I have explained already, our current circumstance were precipitated by the threat of the Arazi. It made our long-standing approach untenable...”

“There was no good reason for you to invade.” Cadence cut her off with a snarl. “There was no reason at all that I can see beyond a desperate grab at our sovereignty while our strength was directed elsewhere. The very thing that you claim Agrant fears with regards to us.”

“It was a matter of practicality.” She simply could not let go of this thread. “Duke Volpe, I am certain that you would have ordered the same thing in my position?”

“Quite possibly,” he conceded. “Yet I did not, and you did. And now you claim that you want our friendship? More than friendship. Military alliance. Quite a hole you have dug yourselves into, wouldn’t you say?”

Perhaps she was truly angry. Her lips seemed a little thinner. There was a touch of warmth in her voice. “One that I am currently trying to extricate all of us from while you seek to assign blame. Would you judge that to be entirely fair?”

“Fairness matters little in matters of statecraft,” he said as neutrally as he could muster. “As I’m sure we are all entirely too aware.”

There was another lull in the conversation. So Artemio took it on himself to press forward. “It was my understanding that you had a good relationship with the House of Cerva. May I ask what changed so abruptly? Other than the issue of draconic invaders?”

“Me,” Cadence piped up. “I was meant to be their hold on the kings, yet I will not bow to their false god.”

“While that was unfortunate, it was, in fact, a matter of inheritance.”

Cadence's mouth snapped shut at the word. But Modesta had eyes only for Artemio. It was the somewhat inevitable result of the queen placing herself in a subordinate role in the proceedings. It made him the center of the ambassador's attentions. "My husband is eternal. He shall outlive every one of us. And with such a span he thinks not in such short terms as a single reigning monarch, but in terms of dynasty. The Cerva line seem to be incapable of fostering such a dynasty. Thus, we must look to alternative solutions. Unless you happen to be currently with child, your Majesty?"

She glanced to the queen only after that was said, staring intently at Cadence with an open and calm expression that with just a little tweak would have been a challenge.

The queen most assuredly took it as such. Wilting in the face of it. "You know well that I am not."

"Yet by the account of all who examined you before your gifting to Espher, there is no physical impairment at the root of this issue." Modesta swiveled that burrowing stare back to Artemio. "Ergo, the fault must be in the Cerva line. You can understand why the chaos of a civil war in a neighbor would engender worry?"

Artemio felt oddly obliged to defend the absent twins. Though he had to admit that the lack of an heir had been something of a concern for everyone. "The king is not so old that the possibility of heirs is entirely gone."

"We would have seen some sign by now if the union was to bear fruit. Even if it were fruit withered on the vine." Again Modesta snapped back to Cadence. "Has there been any such sign, your Majesty?"

On first spying her, Artemio had been taken by her beauty, for if nothing else, the queen had that in her favor. Yet now she looked all the more beautiful, glowing from within with unabating rage. It called out to something in Artemio. Some desire, no doubt born of his own dead father's foul temper, to soothe such anger when he saw it. She sneered at Modesta, and he even found that enchanting. "Your spies have served you well. There has not."

"Spies?" Modesta chuckled. As if such a thought would never have occurred to her. As if she didn't have a network of agents diligently feeding her intelligence. "Hardly a necessity when it comes to so vital a matter for the whole kingdom. I would hope your courtiers had the good grace to avoid sharing such gossip in your earshot, but you cannot have hoped that such a thing is not a subject of common discussion?"

The rage soured. Her face went back to the carefully cultivated blankness, and Cadence once more showed the two pinpricks of blush upon her cheeks. “What a joy to know that the comings and goings of my bedroom are fair game for tavern chatter.”

“The price of rule, I am afraid. For the private to become public.” Modesta swirled the wine in her glass. The only one of them to be partaking of the refreshments so far. “Regardless of how your dignity is offended, it has made certain factions within the Holy Court of Agrant nervous. Nervous enough that they have begun to apply pressure. To suggest to the Eternal Emperor that perhaps the price in uncertainty is not worth paying for the shield that Espher offers to our northern flank. Those who would simply make this another part of Agrant and damn that which was lost in the struggle. Many feel that stability matters more than the uniqueness of your assistance.”

There was a long, drawn-out pause in which Artemio almost felt compelled to speak. But there had been no question posed, so by the odd linguistic quirks of the Agrantine, the ambassador was not done. “I do not wish to trouble you with these matters of course. It has always been my wish to keep you from fearing your friend to the south, but it is my hope that you can understand that I am the one representing the moderate solution to the problem of Espher?”

It rang uncomfortably true in Artemio’s mind. While his usual area of study was history, the longevity of the Agrantine Empire made many patterns throughout that history crystal clear. There would have been many in that court who considered the special relationship between their nations to be heretical, who considered the Shadebound to be monsters, or at the very least the worldly consorts of monsters. The idea that many to the south wanted Espher gone was hardly a revelation to him. Only that the ambassador was now willing to speak of it so openly was a surprise. “I can understand why you withheld that particular piece of information, because yes, the idea that the maniac that led an invasion force to capture our capital being considered in any way moderate is invariably concerning.”

“The tragedy of it is that she is probably telling the truth.” Cadence sighed. “I’m amazed that we are even speaking at all. Agrant tends to prefer negotiations using fire and sharp implements.”

For the first time in all of their conversations, Ambassador Modesta looked truly uncomfortable. Staring down at the floor. As though she were giving away things that she did not

want to. Artemio had no doubt that it was being exaggerated for effect and that she was parting with these secrets in a precisely calculated order to bring about her desired outcome, but at the same time, it seemed likely that she was telling them things that she would normally have been ordered to conceal. “Throughout the years, to maintain the peace between our nations, I have greatly oversold the cost in lives and gold to conquer Espher. I have lavishly praised her military capabilities, lamenting only that leadership was lacking. Now that is no longer the case. The situation has changed, and so my position changes with it. Now more than ever I can see the value in your independence. Would you prefer I adhere to dogma?”

Cadence leaned across to Artemio but did not bother to whisper. The room was too small and too silent for any such subterfuge. “This is a negotiating tactic. She positions herself as the polite compromise and threatens us with bringing the full might of Agrant to bear upon us if we do not snatch it from her hands, effusive with praise.”

Artemio’s eyes did not leave Modesta’s face for a moment. If she was offended at being called a liar once more, then she didn’t bother to show it. Why would she? When she had a ready defender in the form of him. “Is it? There can be no question that Agrant could bring forces to bear against us that we simply could not match. This idea of the cost of conquest being too high seems entirely in keeping with how they have made policy decisions in the past. Even if there is a good chance that she is deceiving us, is that a risk we can afford to run?”

“Agrant would have to drown us in blood.” Cadence sneered. “They would have to abandon dozens of other more tempting prospects, prizes that the emperor has been plotting for across centuries. They would cripple their own fighting power and make themselves a target for every scavenger and predator on the continent.”

She laid her hand on Artemio’s arm, and at last he turned to face her. To see her sincerity. “There is a reason they have compromised. There is a reason I was sent here to marry into the royal family and foster a bond between our nations. My children were meant to bridge the gap, to be pliable to Agrantine demands when the time came.”

It was no more than he had always suspected, but they were drifting into territory that it had always been wisest for members of his family in particular to avoid. “Without speaking ill of them, was the king not already sufficiently pliable, given the assistance received in ascending to the throne?”

Cadence was not under any such compunctions. She could admit what had long been rumored about the Cerva insurrection without any harm coming to her. “Perhaps my husband was not showing sufficient gratitude?”

“Or perhaps this is the consequence of a lack of heir, as I have already stated.” Modesta brought their attention back to her in short order. “Must you constantly assume the worst of me?”

“We are all judged by our actions, Ambassador.” Artemio could not be riled so easily. “And while you have given a good account of yourself with words, the fact remains that there are Agrantine soldiers in Covotana.”

She threw up her hands. “Which I will be more than happy to withdraw with all haste once our negotiations are complete. Have I not promised as much?”

Cadence spat her next words with such force Artemio almost expected Modesta to rock back under the weight of the blow. “What worth are your promises?”

“What I believe my queen means is that regardless of our negotiations, your soldiers will be removed from Espher.” Artemio turned the full weight of his own glare against the Agrantine. She had most assuredly been working on him the entire time they were talking. Twisting things to better manipulate him. It seemed that she considered him to be a settled arrangement. It was time to disabuse her of that illusion. They were enemies. Regardless of how politely they discussed the politics of the situation. “Whether it is by statecraft or warcraft, they shall not last.”

“Of course, we are all in agreement on that fact.” Modesta did not flinch. Perhaps she thought he was only mimicking the queen’s direction and had no anger of his own. In fact, she seemed almost pleased at the first hint of antagonism from him. “You and I are seeking the most peaceable outcome, are we not?”

“The most peaceable outcome would be your immediate departure without making further demands,” he replied, casually. “But I can fully understand that your diplomatic position here has been permanently compromised, and you now seek to create a new ‘solution’ to the Espher problem. One in which Agrant might expect to exercise a hold over us once more despite your misstep.”

Sensing that she had an ally in the room rather than another player, Cadence seemed to have acquired some nerve. She had the beginnings of a smile on her face. “Rather difficult to arrange when you’ve lost the king. No way of knowing what mood he’ll come back in, is there?”

Still Modesta remained unruffled. “Not so difficult as you might assume. There are options that the three of us might explore. If you still mean to seek peace?”

That particular phrasing—options that the three of them might explore—stuck in Artemio’s mind for a moment longer than her usual platitudes and slyness. It had significance. Whatever solution Modesta meant to propose involved all three of them, not just him and her, not just her and the queen. “I am not certain which options you are suggesting. Nor why those I can conceive of would require the three of us.”

Modesta leaned forward and set her wineglass down. For all she had made a show of drinking from it, it was barely touched. You could take the woman out of the ascetic theocracy, but you couldn’t take the ascetic theocracy out of the woman.

“You wish for me to lay my cards upon the table, so to speak?”

Cadence gave her answer. “We can neither assent to nor deny any bright idea you may have until we know what it is.” Leaning forward too, eyes brightening from the dull sheen they had been holding from the moment they’d encountered each other in the hall. She was coming alive again. Finally, they were getting to the heart of matters instead of all this endless circling.

“The king is gone. The throne of Espher empty,” Modesta said plainly. “It must be occupied. Someone must sit it. On this we are all agreed?”

“The king is neither gone nor not at this moment,” was Artemio’s measured reply. “The fact that he is beyond your reach does not remove him from the discussion.”

Modesta sighed. “Then let us consider the possibilities. He is dead or he is alive and fled like a coward to leave his wife alone to deal with the situation the moment that danger arose. In either one of these scenarios, can you conceive of any way in which he could then return to the throne?”

“In the latter, most certainly. He is the king.” Artemio set his jaw. He did not like where this conversation was going. Nor the quiver of realization that he saw passing through Cadence. “He is king because he is king, not because the people love him.”

Modesta pressed on. “And how might a king so unloved by his people rule? When he has lost their trust, and that of his court? How could he be trusted to lead again in a time of crisis?”

Artemio half expected Cadence to give answer to that. To defend her husband’s choice as something other than cowardice. The rational move of a rational man, removing an important

hostage from the reach of an enemy. She did not speak up for him. Or rather, them. She loathed the two of them in truth. So, it was small wonder that she thought the worst of them now.

So Artemio had to say, “He is the king.”

“By what right is he king?” Modesta cocked her head to the side.

Artemio could feel the shape of this ploy now. He could feel the teeth of the trap closing in around him. “By right of blood.”

“So, whosoever has the best claim to the throne by blood should rule?”

Artemio did not answer. There was no answer that he could give that wouldn’t lead precisely where she wanted to lead him. Either blood won out, or there were contingencies in which it didn’t. If the contingencies existed, then this would have become one of them. If blood won out, then...

“That is the law.” Cadence interrupted his train of thought. “Both of man and nature.”

It was all Modesta needed. Her head snapped back to Artemio, and she pasted on an expression of faux horror. “Then forgive me, your Majesty, for failing to address you with your proper title. I hope that my misunderstanding of your customs has not given offense. Where I am from, the emperor rules not by virtue of his blood but by divine right. You can understand how the difference confused me?”

It had all been leading to this, and Artemio could not express how disappointed he was. He had thought that for once he was being treated as a human being with his own virtues, but it came back to blood once more. He was here because he was a useful tool.

“I am not the king.” It came out in a growl. “And I do not appreciate being addressed as such.”

Modesta feigned surprise. “You are not the descendant of the last true king of Espher?”

“I am no usurper.” His bellowed words shook the glass panes lining the roof. He did not know when he had gone from seated to standing or when his fists had clenched. Yet here he was looming over the two women like some ogre. Floorboards creaking beneath him.

In the moment that it took him to compose himself, the two women seemed to share a whole conversation in their meaningful glances. It took real effort to force his legs to bend and to settle back into his chair. He scooped up his own glass of wine from the table and took a solid gulp, hoping to wash down his anger. Artemio silently chastised himself, both for blurting out

anything too true in front of the ambassador and because he was well aware that drinking heavily was hardly the best thing to improve your emotional control.

“What does this... idea have to do with me?” Cadence finally broke the silence.

“I have endeavored to keep myself abreast of the political situation in Espher as part and parcel of my duties here. There will be factions within your court that would not approve of the House of Volpe returning to power. Enough of them to provoke the civil war that we are seeking to avoid. Yet a significant proportion of those factions support your Majesty without reservation.” Modesta spoke with a swiftness that seemed at odds with her usual languid tone. As though she hoped to rush through this part without objections. It made the hair on the back of Artemio’s neck prickle, and it made him hang on every word for the subtext. “By combining both of your positions, we would be able to achieve the lasting stability that Agrant hopes to see. You can both see how such stability would be good for Espher beyond merely pleasing your neighbors, I hope?”

Even devoting his considerable attention to the conversation, he still couldn’t grasp what she was getting at. “I’m sorry, but I’m not sure how the pair of us presenting a united front resolves the issue of the longevity and continuance in Espher.”

From his side, the queen groaned softly. “The ambassador is not suggesting that we form a political alliance, Duke Volpe. She is suggesting that we wed.”

For a breathless moment, Artemio tried to think about it objectively. Tried to distance himself from the situation. Tried not to listen to the panic rising in his gullet.

“You’re already married,” Artemio said. Definitely said, and not yelled. His head snapped around to Modesta to try again with a little more dignity. “She’s married!”

“To a man who is dead.” The ambassador shrugged. “Is it not the custom of Espher that widows are free to remarry as they please?”

“He isn’t dead!” Artemio snapped. Cadence was mysteriously quiet on the subject and even now was averting her eyes from him. Did she know something he did not? If he could just get her away from Modesta there might have been the opportunity to pry the truth from her, but under the watchful eye of the ambassador there wasn’t a hope of him dragging the truth out.

“Politically, he is.” Modesta seemed entirely unbothered by Artemio’s emotional reaction to the suggestion that the Cerva line had ended. As if she thought that it was just artifice, the same

as the emotions she chose to show. “And of all people, I feel certain that you know the necessary precedent for a widow remarrying without the body of her spouse having been laid to rest?”

It was not an area which Artemio had given a great deal of study to, but it took very little reflection to pull up a multitude of cases that had come before the court. Enough of them that the precedent had been quite firmly set, and if the conditions were met, an assumption of death was laid down as fact. There had been few contesting voices over the years. If any storm-swept husbands had ever returned to find their bed warmed by another man, it had not made it into any official accounts. Still. “When they’re lost at sea! Not when...”

Modesta cut him off. “Lost at sea. So, when they are blatantly absent in a dangerous place with nobody the wiser as to their location. Is that not the very definition of our current situation?”

Artemio grit his teeth together, trying to contain his temper. Yet it was the queen who spoke next, with a quaver in her voice that made Artemio fear she was on the verge of tears at them so callously discussing her husband’s death. “Ambassador, you ask far too much.”

“Is she not beautiful? Is he not handsome? And what of wits. The pair of you seem matched well.” Modesta reached over the table and tried to take their hands, to draw them together. Neither one of the Espherans was having any of it. They jerked back from her grasp as though she carried an electric charge. Still, she pressed on with her insinuations. “A more mature woman would be an ideal match for a young man of little experience. Particularly in matters of continuance. Though I suspect you shall barely even notice the scant years between you. Indeed, I would think either one of you would consider yourself lucky to be so paired.”

The knee-jerk reaction would have been to reject the whole thing out of hand, declare he had no interest in the queen and inevitably insult her and drive a wedge between them in the meantime. It was a simple conversational trap, but he took a moment to avoid it. “While her Majesty is a perpetual wonder each time that I lay eyes upon her, she is wed, and I am not king. These indelible facts have not been altered simply because you wish for them to be so.”

The queen paused just long enough before launching into her own tirade to give Artemio a soft smile. “And while Duke Volpe is as charming a courtier as I’ve ever had the fortune to encounter, I am not some harlot to be passed from hand to hand as and when it best suits Agrant.”

It was strange that for all that Modesta had sought to find an easy compromise, she had instead struck against the two most solid possible points of opposition. Just as Artemio had spent all of his life avoiding any hint of impropriety towards the Cerva, to the point of murdering his own father in their service, so too had poor Cadence spent more than a small portion of her adult life as the subject of lewd and crude jokes on the part of the common man. It was a normal thing for peasants to long to tear down the beautiful and powerful, to make them nothing more than equals in their eyes, but there had been only one way to assail the unassailable majesty of the queen and that was through reference to the unfortunate matter of the twin kings sharing her.

At best in tavern tales, this was treated like some mummer's farce with each man tagging out of the bedroom for rest while his duplicate took over the duty of sating the insatiable. At worst, there were graven images circulated among some of the young men of the House of Seven Shadows. Lewd images meant to entertain those of prurient interest. Among them was one depicting the queen in congress with the pair of the Cerva twins at once. It had sickened him then, and it sickened him now. Yet it was burned into his mind like everything else that he studied, and he could not rid himself of the afterimages, even here in her true radiance.

"My dear woman, I am not some rumormonger among your handmaidens. I would never suggest such a thing of you. You are, to all intents and purposes, a widow. You, a foreign queen in a land that holds no love for your people, in a time when hatred of the outsider is reaching its fever pitch amidst the threat of war on every side. Does the idea of a protector in these troubled times hold no appeal?"

Artemio managed to focus on the present for long enough to interject, "I love that we are simply brushing past the fact that you are the threat of war. Very diplomatic."

"I do not need a protector." Cadence carried on as though he had not said a word. "As you have told us, I am well loved among the Espheran court. I shall be well cared for regardless of how this situation resolves."

With an audible sigh, Modesta settled back once again. Her wine remained untouched on the table between them. Artemio considered that he should really put his down before some fresh revelation had him flinging it about the room, but there was a comforting weight to the warm pewter in his hands. Surely a bad sign that proximity to wine, even when he did not drink it, felt like a comfort.

The ambassador pressed on. "Once more I must ask you to look to tomorrow's tomorrow. For now, positioned as you are in such proximity to power, you are beloved. Yet when that fades, do you believe that you shall still be so cherished?"

"I do not need adoration, only the freedom to live beyond Agrantine reach." Cadence had looked beautiful in her wrath, but in her disgust all the fine contours of her face contorted. This was a rage beyond anything Artemio had seen in her. "It will take the promise of more than some handsome young lordling to have me willingly place my head upon the block."

For a long moment silence hung in the solarium once more. Servants scuttled about lighting lamps, but it was apparent that negotiations were not going to continue into the night. Not today.

Artemio forced himself to set down the cup, then steepled his fingers so that his unoccupied hands did not nervously reach for it once more. "It seems that we are at something of an impasse, Ambassador. The queen has no desire to marry me. I have no desire to usurp a throne. And it seems that you will have to present a more acceptable list of demands."

"I notice that you did not say you did not wish to wed her Majesty." Modesta could accurately portray a great many emotions, but this pseudo-flirtation looked almost comical on her. As though she were some excitable child. "Could it be that we have found the secret love of the famously chaste Duke Volpe?"

"It could not." Artemio cut her off dead. If she meant to embarrass him, she would need to discover a new avenue of attack. This one was now shut. "No matter my admiration for her Majesty, whatever it may be, my duty to Espher comes first."

Cadence settled back and crossed her arms across her chest, leading Artemio to look away swiftly. "Please make a different suggestion, Ambassador. Perhaps one that allows for the return of my husband to his throne?"

"You must understand that I have considered all of the other possibilities before presenting this one to you. Of course, I can see why it might be objectionable to you both, the reasons are obvious, but without a substantial change in Espher to adjust the course that it is set upon, I cannot justify my withdrawal." She allowed some exhaustion to emerge from where it had been hidden. "If either of you has a better solution, then I beg you to share it with me. Will you please?"

No bright ideas immediately sprang to the minds of either member of the Espheran delegation. Artemio met the gaze of Cadence properly for the first time since the idea of their

marriage was proposed, and he saw in her a resigned sadness. It was the expression that he had most associated with her until this moment. The face she wore when she thought that others could not see. Her life in Espher had not been an endless parade of comfort and joy, he knew that. The secrets of the royal bedchambers were widely discussed, but he had scarcely had any real time to consider what it must do to a person, to know that their love was ever founded in a deception. To be torn from family and home to be wed off to some foreign king you had never known and then to be treated so coarsely by them that none dare to speak of it.

If Artemio had been plucked from his family at her age and given a new lease on life, it would have delighted him. He would have been overjoyed to be loosed from his own shackles and placed in such a gilded cage. But she was not him, and few people hated their parents with the passion he had mustered over the decades.

In turn, she knew nothing of him but what she had been told. Reclusive, intelligent enough to be useful, born of an unfortunate line, most likely brought up to believe he was the rightful heir to the throne of Covotana. She could not know who he truly was because it would have been madness to show the truth, to show the gaping crack in his family's armor, to let House Volpe's many enemies know they were already divided.

Once more the ambassador spoke, offering empathy in place of her own weariness at proceedings. "Perhaps we should retire for the evening. I realize that all of this must have come as something of a shock to you. A night to sleep upon it may be in order, before any decisions are made. Shall we retire for the night?"

Both Artemio and the queen opened their mouths to speak, both already bristling at the suggestion that personal weakness was all that stood in the path of progress. As the lesser in station, it was of course Artemio who demurred. "After you."

"My thanks, Duke Volpe." She offered him a smile, still sad but honest. "I believe that I can speak for both of us when I tell you that no amount of rest is going to move our position on this matter, Ambassador."

"Then perhaps you will be able to concoct some other solution that I have not seen. I do not claim omniscience. That part, my dear husband chooses not to share." She waved forward one of her guardsmen, concealed previously amidst the hangings by the alcove where Artemio faintly suspected the servants usually lurked, waiting to bring forth fresh drinks on cue. "I believe you both have rooms in the palace already?"

“Mine was soaked in blood last I saw it.”

If Artemio had meant to shock her, he was sure to be sorely disappointed. Nothing short of a direct meteorite strike was likely to dent her composure if she did not choose to have it dented.

“I’m sure the servants have seen to that by now.”

It was not until he had passed from the room that he realized Modesta had separated them so there was no chance to speak without her presence. She took her duty as chaperone most seriously, or the queen held some secret that she did not want shared.