

17 - The Last Siege of Covotana

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

The Empire of Agrant attacked before sunset.

If Artemio had been back from chatting up the Arazi a little bit sooner, he would have sifted through everything that Harmony had heard from the God-Emperor and probably would have interpreted this turn of events from the conversation, but he did not have a chance to speak with Harmony at all, he barely made it back to the gates before the approaching Agrantine made contact with the arrayed forces between them and the walls.

It was a bloodbath. The Espheran troops had prepared as best they could, but in terms of sheer numbers, the Agrantine had them soundly beaten before they had even begun. Orsina and the other Shadebound lined the walls of Covotana, unleashing wave after wave of elemental attacks, all of the nobles who would usually have been so sparing with their use of shades were inspired by the way that she spent her own life unceasingly in the defense of the city and redoubled their own efforts. Decades were spent in moments. Lifetimes squandered, as the fire and ice and lightning struck down amidst the charging Agrantine soldiers and were almost immediately intercepted by the saints among them. It was not a perfect defense. Many soldiers died with each of the shadebound volleys, but it was not the utter devastation that would have been required to turn the tide.

Harmony found herself on the walls amidst the shadebound. Standing shoulder to shoulder with men and women that she'd never even met before, who were now killing themselves by inches to serve her cause.

She could do nothing but watch.

Harmony had neither magical powers to call upon or troops to command. Not even a crossbow to fire out into the mass of enemies. Not that she'd have had the range to do anything more than pepper her own back lines.

The Agrantine did not suffer from the same limitations. The great palanquin had remained in place during their advance, as had those strange smoking towers, but the war-machines to the rear had been rolled forward almost as swiftly as the footsoldiers. Their advance had only halted because to proceed further would involve rolling over their own troops, and while Harmony had

no doubt that the emperor would order such a thing without a second thought, there was no need to.

Not when they could hit the walls from there.

The scorpions began unloading their lethal rain across the battlefield. Some shots poorly calibrated, and falling short into the mass of Espheran soldiers at the foot of the walls, but most hammering home into the city walls themselves. They were not trying to bring them down, for that they would have deployed an entirely different apparatus, instead they were striking at the wall's defenders. Trying to knock the shadebound from where they were posted. The shadebound might have been ineffective in this battle, but they still represented Espher's most fearsome resource when it came to warfare.

The bolts flew true, evening out in their curvature so that they would pass straight through the space where the shadebound and their keepers stood guard. From there, the parts of those nobles would be strewn across the roofs of the city before the bolts finally came down. A massacre.

But no plan survived contact with the enemy, and the Agrantine had chosen poorly indeed to make an enemy of Orsina.

They did not shatter off some invisible barrier or turn away as though brushed aside by some unseen hand. They merely stopped dead in the air and then dropped uselessly to the ground. The whole first volley, enough to block the sun from the sky when they had seen it before, discarded like a love note from an unworthy suitor. Stealing a glance at Orsina, Harmony couldn't hold back a grin. She hadn't even broken a sweat.

Down on the ground the soldiers saw nothing of this, but up on the walls of the city the defenders began whooping with delight at their newfound invulnerability. Orsina was the only one who showed no signs of joy. If anything, she looked sterner than the moment before. Harmony hated to see her so but had no opportunity to alleviate some of her concerns before the battle started. If she had just a moment to pass along what Artemio had said, then she knew that the scowl would be lifted from Orsina's face. That the coldness that had permeated her in the last day would thaw, and she would become the woman that Harmony loved again.

The next bolts launched from the scorpions were tipped with star metal.

They must have cost a king's ransom, each one of them as valuable as one legion of the troops down below, and they were far fewer in number because of that cost, but the investment

paid dividends. The bolts tore through clusters of shadebound along the wall. All of them suffering some injury except for Orsina, and those cringing beside her. The bolt that had been aimed for her had stopped, just as surely as the last ones had.

Harmony gawked at it, not understanding how it could have been done, until the head of the bolt tumbled off to enrich whichever scavenger would later wander the fields outside, and she could see that the wooden shaft had been crushed to sawdust in Orsina's desperate grasp.

She could not touch the star metal with her shades, but the rest of the bolt was fair game, and she knew now how the trick could be done.

There was no second volley of star-metal, only regular repetitions of the first attempt with the usual steel. Not intended to do harm any more, but to divide Orsina's attention. Probably wise, given the sheer destruction that she was raining down now that she had worked out how to circumnavigate the saint's blades.

It was a turning point in the battle. Though once again, those down on the ground actually involved in the fighting would probably never know it.

Harmony did not pretend to know the distinction between the various troops out there fighting for her life. She did not know which banners were flown by families loyal to her house, and which were political enemies. In all likelihood, nobody on the front lines was liable to be a friend to her and her brother, or they would not have been placed on the front lines. Few battles of attrition were won by such men, and little glory would go to any that did survive the press of two shield-walls meeting. Heroes swept in later, to clean up.

Over the raucous hubbub of armies and the deafening clash of steel, trumpets sounded along the length of the walls. The same sound originating from somewhere deep in the city's heart, and being carried out and all around by messengers. She paused for but a moment, trying to grasp what was being commanded by her brother, then she saw her answer.

On the furthest flank of the battle, where the Espheran army used an outcropping of the city walls to defend the end of their line, the cavalry had arrived.

In all that had followed, she had forgotten all about her desperate hunt for heads of horse. Of the steppes-men bought off and brought down to train rangers in the use of their own twice bent bows. She had entirely put out of her mind that small piece of all this that she bore some responsibility for, but now she saw its application.

From the one unwatched side of the city, where neither Arazi nor Agrantine had eyes, the light cavalry of Espher sallied forth. Pouring from the gates, and where they had lain in wait pressed hard against the walls. Their first stretch was eaten up swiftly, as they rode down the side of the caldera in which Espher was built, and used that momentum well to gain distance. From on the back of the horses, the arrows began to fly.

As they came along, the Agrantine would raise shields against them, swiveling within their formation, but it was insufficient, and drew attention from the front lines where they began to be pressed back. The insufficiency was not in the perfectly disciplined application of their new defensive posture, but in the speed with which they managed it. By the time that they had their shields up, the rear tail of the cavalry charge was already passing by.

All along the length of the Agrantine army, arrows rained down, peppering the troops. Not with enough force to actually disrupt any of the vast formations that the emperor had placed them in, but snuffing out lives all the same, and more importantly disrupting their focus.

To be distracted when in a pushing match with the enemy army, was to lose ground, and even though the soldiers now being hit were near to the rear ranks, the loss of their momentum would ripple forward.

Yet all of this distraction was itself a distraction from the cavalry's true purpose. They had mustered every war horse in Espher, and as many as could be bought for ready money from the kingdoms that abutted them. They had trained their troops in the use of bows from on horseback, though it went against centuries of military tradition. And now, they were witnessing the payoff. As the slow lumbering beast of the Agrantine army began turning to face them, catching a glimpse only of the dirt that they threw up in their wake, the cavalry cut in at last, sweeping around the rear rank of foot-soldiers to head straight into the nests of war machines.

What the hell was Art doing?

It would have made sense if he had spent all of his horse in that way if they had no defense against the scorpions, but Orsina had already proven herself more than a match for them. He was squandering one of their scarcest resources trying to remove emplacements of war-machines that he could have left well alone to serve as nothing more than a distraction.

Perhaps this was still a distraction, meant to make the Agrantine pull back and defend their soft rear end, but Harmony did not believe it. Art might have used it as a distraction in addition to something else, but she could not comprehend what that something else might have been.

The opposite flank to the one where the cavalry had emerged was suddenly reinforced. She had been so distracted that she had not seen those troops dedicated to facing off against the Arazi being drawn in.

Artemio must have managed to bamboozle the Arazi somehow, convinced them not to attack right now. She had no idea how he had done it, but combining the forces that had previously been split gave the armies of Espher an entirely unexpected advantage. They were still grossly outnumbered, of course, but the differential was now far smaller than it had been.

There was the sound of an explosion, soft and distant, and Harmony's eyes were drawn back to the rear ranks of the Agrantine lines where one of the transported towers had been toppled to crush a nearby scorpion. The front of the cavalry formation had done their job well, picking off all the crew and operators of the machines, and now the rear, who had thus far done little but trail along behind their more successful predecessors, were dismounting and laying waste to the machines themselves. They would not be destroyed, not by mortal hands in limited time, but they would no longer fire upon Espher this day, and what more could they really ask for?

Something more than the disabling of machines that had already been rendered useless, probably.

The sky above them was awash in a thousand colors. The curses of the shadebound streaking across the thick cover of smog, changing it, filling it with illusory life and light. Pink and blue, red, and gold, a veritable fireworks display spattered across the sky.

Words could not describe the cacophony of war. The screaming, the clatter of steel, the concussive force of the shadebound's power impacting against the Agrantine ranks. It was as though all the world had gone mad, and if it would not have cost her face, Harmony would have liked nothing more than to flee her place on the wall and find some quiet hole in which to bury her head.

Yet through it all, neither her brother nor the emperor were anywhere to be seen. Art, she could understand, he was probably mounting the defenses on the other side of the city in preparation for that fresh onslaught, but the God Emperor had no such excuse. Yet still he remained in his palanquin, ordering men to their death without even bothering to watch them fall.

She might not have had her brother's troops, or Orsina's power, but the one thing she did not lack was righteous anger. That bastard was just lounging around while men died for him, all because he was having a tantrum over one of his little toys being taken away.

Moving in the din felt like an effort, as though she had been rooted in place and now had to drag herself free of the flagstones, but she walked along the wall to Orsina's side, leaned in close to whisper in her ear and pointed to the palanquin.

The words that she said were snatched away by the chaos. Her vitriol washed over Orsina without finding ingress. But the meaning of what she wanted was clear, and even now after everything that had occurred, Orsina did not seem to have it in her to resist Harmony's request.

With a jerk of her wrist, a wall of dragon's fire burst forth in the air, hiding them from sight and wiping away the next flurry of scorpion bolts as though they were moths touching upon a candle's flame. For an instant all the battlefield seemed ablaze, but when the thick black smoke parted, all was as it had been, all except Orsina.

She had stepped up onto the wall and held a pointed finger out now, the same accusing gesture with which Harmony had damned the emperor, repeated.

From the finger's tip a light shone. A flame burning hotter than fire, passing through reds and blues to transparency and then a blinding white. The kind of flame that Harmony had only ever seen spilling forth from the Prophet and Konus. A god-killing sunbeam of purifying light.

Where the palanquin was struck, the metal melted away. Peeling off to patter down onto the gathered hordes of soldiers below. They died as it rained down on them. They faltered and they fell. The whole palanquin lurched forward as balance was lost, as the awful burden that those people had to carry in life fell to crush them in death.

That awful burning line cutting through reality burned on, creeping ever slower, parting the vast monolith of steel like a heated knife passing down through butter. The impenetrable steel becoming as water, and flowing away from its touch.

Still, Orsina drew it further down, splitting the great monolith in two, all the way down to the very bottom where it would surely find its intended target.

It deflected. Harmony had never seen a prism of glass, did not know the light would be split flowing through it. She had no context with which to describe how that impossible burning light exploded apart into shattered fragments, streaming out in every direction to slice through

Agrantine and Espheran lines alike, even carving through the city wall itself before Orsina cut it off.

The emperor was not without his own defenses.

Screaming had followed both Orsina's initial strike, and the deflection that had caught everyone off guard. Agony and terror to see her true potential unleashed. One tower atop the walls of Covotana slid slowly to the side as Harmony could do nothing but watch. The full compliment of guards atop it scrambling and leaping for the safety of the wall, and failing to make their escape in time before it toppled down to crush the men below. All of this time, this was what Orsina had been holding back. The power to level mountains if she so chose.

Involuntarily, Harmony found herself taking a step away from her love as fear seized her heart.

It was all that saved her.

The emperor struck back, not with fireballs and lightning or any of the fripperies that the shadebound could muster, but with pure unadulterated power. The section of the wall where Orsina stood was ripped away. Lifted from its place as though the smooth curved line carving through the stonework had always been there.

Orsina was plucked from her place and dragged out over the open air. The shadebound around her scattered in terror if they still lived, but just as the stone had been cleanly parted, so too were many of them. Toppling apart on the spot as parts of them were simply disconnected and dragged off along with Orsina. All their power, all the spirits of the dead that they could command, it meant nothing in the face of a god.

Harmony barely managed to muster a scream before the little slice of wall that Orsina was perched upon was whipped away. Orsina hadn't even the time to cast her a backwards glance before the length of the battlefield had them separated.

The last of the Agrantine war machines had been laid low. The cavalry of Espher were making a frantic withdrawal. The walls no longer needed Orsina to guard them. But even so, the moral of the defenders was shattered as they saw their champion stolen. Men broke and ran. Good, stolid men, who had trained for war all their lives suddenly realised how much more of life there had been that they had missed out on. The stairs down from the walls became a tangled mass of bodies as reinforcements tried to charge up and the defenders tried to flee.

Harmony herself was stuck for a moment, ambivalent. Unsure.

Then the shadows fell over them, blotting out what little was left of the light making its way through the smog. Vast shapes moved overhead. Impossibly vast. Larger than anything that should have been able to accomplish flight.

The dragons descended from the clouds as they cleared the city walls and from all across the field of battle Harmony could hear the courage of Espher shatter.

Wyvern swept down in the dragons' wake, plunging by so close that if Harmony had the wherewithal in that moment she might have reached up and struck them but she was too dumbstruck by the sudden turn of events to even form a sentence yet.

The swarm of them blinded her to the battlefield, set her on her heels. Blade drawn and waiting for the first of the Arazi to drop from the saddle and attack, but none came. Even the wyvern seemed to pay her no mind as she swiped at them.

With an all too familiar boom, the dragons venom ignited on the field beyond the swarm. There were so many dragons, more than she could ever have even conceived of. Konus must have brought his whole barbarous empire down with him to chase Orsina.

Well he would never catch her now. The god of Agrant had taken her. She would already be dead, or worse.

Orsina was gone.

She was gone.

Harmony felt the weight of that thought nestle in her mind. A world without Orsina. Forget that the war was lost and that their home would burn. Forget that her brother would be executed, and that she'd die with him. A world without Orsina was not a world that she wanted to live in.

She drew her sword, and she leapt.

The wyvern that she caught was no different from all of the rest. The same leathery skin stretched from forelimb to hind, the same long beak and curved back crest. The same feathered barbarian on it's back. She caught it by the rearmost claw, and her weight dragged it out of the sky.

It beat its wings with a frantic energy, twisting and turning to try and dislodge her, but she latched on, tooth and nail. It was borne down by her weight and she in turn was borne out onto the battlefield, crossing all the distance she'd travelled by horse in moments until a stray crossbow bolt from amidst the Agrantine lines punched through the beast she had borrowed flight from and she fell to the ground.

Her legs screamed as they hit the churned mud of the battlefield, ankles and knees grinding as she flung herself into a roll to absorb some of the impact. The pain was good. It was better than the awful cold emptiness that she had inside her now. She could still hurt. So she could still hurt them right back.

In a flash, her blade darted out, past shield and armor to pierce through Agrantine flesh. The woman who had come running to investigate her fallen body was run through the throat, but Harmony was in motion again before blood had even spilled.

She was not far behind Agrantine lines. Not nearly as close to the fallen palanquin as she would have liked. But it would suffice. Between her and the target of her vengeance there may have been a thousand men, but that troubled her not at all. She needed to warm up before the main event.

Realizing an enemy was among them, the Agrantine lines rippled and shifted around her. Disgorging first one then a second saint to face her. They thought that her appearance here was a feat of magic, that she was shadebound, and that their special swords could do anything to protect them. She was the first sword of Espher. Nothing could protect them from her wrath.

The first came at her swinging, expecting no resistance once the strings of magic about her were cut, but whatever weakness they might have imagined was not within her. She parried the swinging blade, throwing sparks from her rapier as the flat blade scraped down the length of it before twisting at the last moment before the blade struck her guard to turn it aside entirely and leave the Sword Saint open to a brief thrust through the gizzard.

She did not even need to think. Every motion of this had been drilled into her muscles. Every movement perfected by a lifetime of needing perfection just to be viewed as acceptable. All her mind might have been consumed by rage, but the harsh beast of her body had never needed its commands, it had needed to be leashed.

The next saint was more cautious, but that just meant that Harmony's opening came all the sooner. She leapt, giving up her steady footing to close the fullness of the distance between them, scoring a strike across the saint's thighs before rebounding to hammer the length of her blade into the bald woman's chest.

They hadn't brought enough soldiers.

Dragon's fire burst in two broad swathes alongside her, venom catching in mid air to rain down. It was the first time she'd seen it up close, the way that it pattered down like tears alight,

clinging to whatever it touched. It drove the soldiers closest to her closer and drove the rest away.

She couldn't have asked for better happenstance.

As the Agrantine fled the dragon's fire, they found themselves bleeding. Cuts made so swiftly they had not felt the touch of the blade. Dozens died in those moments, bathed in the light of their kinfolk's pyres, and they never even knew that Harmony was the cause.

She followed along the fire-lines where they led towards the fallen palanquin and the god she needed to slay. She killed indiscriminately as she went, delaying her progress, but leaving no foe at her back. On her best day, she would never have claimed that she could carve a path through an enemy army alone, but this was not her best day. This was the worst day that had ever come to pass, and all would feel her sorrow before she was through.

Tears flowed down her cheeks but did not cloud her eyes. Blood streaked her, but she did not pause to wipe it away. There would be worse to come.

Again and again the dragon's swept over the Agrantine armies, searing lines across them. Art had left the whole battlefield open to them by destroying the enemy war machines. He'd thrown open the gates and invited every flying monster in the world to come soaring over.

She couldn't understand why. He wasn't this stupid. He'd never been this stupid.

Soldier after soldier died, and her body began to forget. Vengeance still had to be had, but going through the motions she was becoming more and more sluggish. It was enough, in the heat of battle, against soldiers who had never faced real talent, but should a saint find her path, there would have been trouble. She would have had to think, and to do that would be an unforgivable mistake.

If she thought, she would remember. The sweet smile of a shared joke. The gentle brush of a fingertip over her knuckles. The heat of a body pressed against her as they lay in bed, moving not at all for the fear of shattering their perfect peace.

It did not matter if it tired, her body still had to lead.

The mass of Agrantine between her and the ruins of the vast molten sepulcher where their god had lived seemed overwhelming at first, but with each pass of the dragons, their numbers thinned and they became more thinly spread.

She was making it, step by staggering step. Slice by bloody slice.

Then she wasn't. A dragon came down on her, claws outstretched to snatch her up. It was only the instant before it hit her that she realized it was Yelena.

"What are you doing?!" She bellowed up at the dragon, as though it could answer. Yelena said nothing, hammering her wings down as crossbow bolts fired off at them from every direction. Harmony yelled, kicked her legs, even hit at the clawed feet wrapped around her. "Let me go! Let go!"

The dragon would not comply, and despite everything, Harmony found that she could not bring herself to strike at this creature with her sword and cut her way free. It was Orsina's.

It was bound to Orsina. The same way she was to Artemio.

So if the dragon lived, then that meant...

Dragging her eyes up from the battlefield, she saw them at last. Orsina and the Emperor of Agrant, hanging in the air above the battlefield in the midst of a great transparent sphere, which arrow, shade-casting and dragon fire could not penetrate.

Orsina lived. She fought. And Harmony had been throwing her own life away without a second thought. Stupid. Always so damned stupid. Her face felt as though it were burning as rational thought returned to her. Patting at Yelena's claws, she felt them loosen, and began the laborious climb across to where the lowest rigging of the harness the dragon wore hung. For the Arazi it was a normal day's exercise, for the people of Espher it would have looked like a death-defying stunt suitable only for the circus, but at some point this had become Harmony's life, and she accepted it as such. Clambering her way up until Kagan's bulk came into sight and he offered her his hand to haul her the rest of the way.

From up in the sky, she could see that the tide of battle had been turned. Orsina and the Emperor may have been trapped in whatever strange battle of wills surrounded them, but now that the Arazi had joined the battle, the actual Agrantine forces were in shambles. Their perfectly constructed formations crumbled in on themselves. Their war machines were little more than charcoal and the portable pillars they'd used to blot out the sun had become bludgeons for the grasping claws of the dragons to sweep about and drop like artillery.

Back at the front lines, the army of Espher stood stalwart, pressing back against them, but it was at the flanks that the battle was truly being fought and won. Titanic thunder lizards, wyvern outriders, even the rare flightless dragons were down there on the ground alongside Espheran soldiers.

Art had done it. Somehow, he had won them over, he'd turned them against the Agrantine. Espher was going to survive. They were all going to survive.

Yet she could muster no elation, because Orsina was still locked in whatever mortal combat looked like for gods and those with the power to challenge them.

18 - War of Gods

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

Orsina was alone.

There was a boundless silence all about her. Distantly she remembered that there were others out there. People she had cared for. Lives she had sought to spare by doing violence. But in this moment, there was only her.

The shades that had whispered in her mind since the moment she had been old enough to remember were gone. Silenced as surely as if their throats had been cut. They had been the background music to her entire existence and now she knew only quiet.

It should have been a relief. She was alone, for the first time in her entire life. Alone with her thoughts. Alone, and certain that those thoughts that she was thinking were her own. Yet she could find no joy in it. No reprieve.

The only voice she could hear inside of her head was her own, but that only meant that they had become her so thoroughly that there was no longer a distinction in tone.

Her bones ground together. Her skin dimpled under the pressure. If she still had hair then she dreaded to think how many directions it would have been splaying about her. Instead she was as bald as a babe. As bald as the emperor himself. Not even stubble had begun to show.

She could feel fingers scratching over her head. Over her face. Tugging at her clothes. She could feel the emperor's will pressing itself against her. Smothering her. As though he were right there, lying on top of her as she writhed and struggled to get out. She called fire, she called water, she called every power her shades had granted her, and they all died at her fingertips.

If the emperor had his way, she'd already be dead. She knew that with the same dull certainty that she knew the sky was up and the ground was down. She was holding him off, keeping that awful weight from closing over her from all sides and crushing her away to nothing. His will hooked at her ears, her fingers, it tugged and tried to tear her apart, but her own tremulous hold on her body kept him out.

All of the world might have bent to his whim, and he might have been able to trap her shade inside of her flesh for now, but inside, it was still hers to command, and he could come no further.

His voice surrounded her. His feelings pressing in on her own, trying to worm inside her head. “I would have taught you to master that which you can barely touch. The faith that they have in you, it is a weapon.”

She pushed back. Her power, such as it was compared to his, flexed and strained against the press of his will. Through teeth she did not want to grit, she hissed out. “I don’t want it.”

His amusement tickled over her. A girlish giggle, too high by far from the vast body that birthed it. “Want matters nothing to a god. We are what they expect us to be. What they believe in.”

“I’m not a god!” Orsina screamed inside the confines of her own mind, her own body. Her shade exploded outwards with her wrath, only to be contained once more. Reverberating back and forth within her. Fury expanding and collapsing in on itself endlessly. Her body shook with it. Her thoughts burned.

The emperor felt it, but his response was contempt. “All necromancers play at it. Only you have come close to the reality, it is not about the using, it is about the becoming.”

She pushed, will and wrath and all that she had, trying to drive the explosion out from within her. Trying so desperately to fight. To resist. “I don’t want to become a shade.”

Again that awful tittering laughter seemed to encompass them. Surrounding Orsina until she could not bear it any more. The mockery, the contempt, the derision. All that she’d feared she’d face if the truth of her humble beginnings came out, now played out over and over again. All that she had she was going to lose. All that she had made herself, it had been for nothing. The emperor’s certainty of his superiority was so complete that it became a physical force, crushing the rebellion from her as it drove the air from her lungs.

“They are the shadows of the gods they could have been. Imbued in death with the faith of the living. Memories of what they are bound with belief to root them in the world. Echoes of greatness. I am that which they pretend to be. A living god, growing more potent with each new supplicant. With each new believer.”

He crushed her down, smaller and smaller until he filled the whole world and she was an insect looking up at him. He was vast and he was powerful and she was nothing. She had been born nothing. She would die nothing. What more could she have expected? “I’m not an echo. I’m not a story. I’m a person. I am a living human being. I don’t want...”

His eyes closed as she spoke and when they reopened she was there, right before him, reflected in the vast shining expanse of his sight. So small. So worthless. “Your people, they are faithless, but in you they see the spark of the divine. It is the only reason that you still live.”

Down and down she went into the pit of despair and darkness. Into the void that he was pressing her into. So far down, so deep, that the light could never reach her again. This was the best place for her. Something so pathetic and shameful should never see the light of day. She was subhuman. Barely even an animal. She was a pallid squirming thing at the bottom of a hole. That she should dare try to speak to him was laughable. She who was nothing, and he who was everything. “You’re a god because people believe you’re a god?”

The hole that she was buried in must have been a part of him, as all things were. His voice echoed in from all around her. Across the stretch of her useless worm of a body, she could feel it. The greatness of him. “Because I am a god their faith flows to me like rivers to the sea.”

Sometime between her being a peasant and a maggot, she had curled up around herself. Hiding her face. Trying to hide her shame. But there could be no hiding. She was the lowest of the low. Charnel house scavenger. Bloodless and witless. No will of her own. Just that which she’d borrowed from the dead. “But which came first?”

His words stripped her skin from her flesh. Her flesh from her bones. Her tenuous grasp on all of the things that made her Orsina flayed away. “Eternity has no beginning or end.”

Everything she had learned in all of her life had been taken away from her. All of the power she’d hoarded to herself as though it could make the blindest bit of difference. She had no control over her life. She had no control over the world. She had no control over even her own soul. She was nothing. A hollow.

Her will gave way. The walls that she had built around herself gave way. The God Emperor of Agrant reared back to strike her defenseless heart.

But he moved too slowly.

Since the moment that she was born, Orsina had walls built around her soul. The ones that she’d made for herself. The ones that the House of Seven Shadows had trained her to raise. The ones that the shades within her had erected to lay claim to their property. They were built to keep Orsina whole, to keep the world outside. They were what had protected her from the God Emperor’s influence. Now that they were gone, the hollow in her heart lay bare.

All that had been holding back the tide of the dead had been torn down.

From the first moment that she had drawn breath every shade in the world had tried to squeeze its way inside of her, and all that had held them off was her now missing will, and the shades that were already occupying that territory.

Now they poured into her. Little sprites born of a dying blade of grass, vast ghosts long forgotten by the living, still casting their long shadow across history. Covotana was an ancient city, Espher, an ancient kingdom, and all who had lived there had died, and in dying come to be shades. The battlefield itself was a nursery, hundreds upon thousands of lost souls severed fresh from their bodies, desperate for some warm dark place in which to shelter themselves. The dead came to her, and pushed their way inside, and down in the deep dark hole at the center of her spirit they found something so much worse than the afterlife awaiting them. They found hunger.

A void at the center of it all. The empty heart of Orsina, forged from her soul and those shades she had already consumed, already made a part of herself. The dead, and the forgotten and the proud memories of Espher, they all came and dove deep into that pool and never resurfaced. Dragged down to drown, to rot, to become part of her.

Where her strength had faltered, theirs did not. Where her will was broken, theirs was resolute. If this man was a god, then he was mistaken in one thing, eternity had no beginning or end, but that did not mean that change would not come. Each shade that Orsina dissolved away into her being, adding its power and distinctiveness to her own, had once lived. When they became shades, they did not believe it was any end. Just a change.

A change that they could grant him.

Before, the pressure of the God of Agrant's will on Orsina's power had been crushing, grinding down her body, spirit and mind, but now it was not enough. Nowhere near enough. It could not contain this sudden influx of power. When there had been one mind to contend with, he could find the points of weakness and press in, but now she was legion. There were a million voices screaming out from inside of her, and no matter how loud he tried to talk over them he could not be heard.

Orsina had closed her eyes in the face of the emperor's awful power, but something else opened them.

Perhaps some part of it was still her. Perhaps even the greater part. The foundation on which all else was built. But what she had become was as different from the shadebound as a god was from a man. She was not possessed by the shades of the dead, they had become her possessions.

They flooded in, until even her endless appetite was glutted, and now when the Emperor of Agrant tried to crush her, he found his hands being pried apart by the forces unleashed from within.

Where he had towered over her but a moment before, large as a mountain in her eyes, now he was not being seen in only a single set of vision, each shade picked at him from a different angle. A dead courtesan cackling at his size. A dead cavalier contemptuous of his plain robes. Everything that made him vast and grand in the eyes of his own people was a joke to the people of Espher. He might have had the faith of the Agrantine, but he had Espher's unwavering condescension.

It flowed through Orsina now. Not a faith in her own power, but an overwhelming doubt at his. He was just a man. He had learned some tricks, played games with shade-craft to empower his bloated carcass, but he was just a man. His power was that of the living, temporal, fleeting. Hers was the power of the dead.

When he jerked his hand away from where it had been outstretched, the frost had already begun to spread up from his wrist. He let out an awful wail. And just as every sound he made carried like a lead weight straight into the base of his follower's skulls, when he hurt, they felt it.

Across the battlefield, the armies of Agrant, united by his unflappable will, faltered. Their march halted. Their saints fumbled their swords.

What had been an ill matched battle against both Espher and the Arazi now became a wholesale slaughter. The front ranks abandoned their stations. The soldiers providing them with support dropped their pikes and turned too. Everywhere, the Agrantine lines collapsed in on themselves, all of them rushing to their god's aid.

Orsina had eyes only for her prey.

She had sensed shades before, even seen them, but now she saw the world as the shades themselves saw it. The chaos of it all. The endless interwoven layers upon layers of history stretching back throughout eternity. The young eating the old to become them. The ancient and powerful absorbing any fool to come close to their sphere of influence. Some shone with their resolute existence, others faded away until they were scarcely an outline. But burning brightest of them all, was the Emperor of Agrant.

His will blazed, his power, his life, shining brighter than anyone else. Everything that had made a dragon unique, the boundless font of life, he had created by collapsing the life of others

into himself. She could feel it now, the cracks along the edges of the lie. The crusted layers of power that had been seen as divinity. She saw it, she reached out and she took hold.

It was as solid a thing as anyone had ever been able to make, built to withstand any blow, his divinity would have been unassailable if anyone tried to attack him as he would have attacked them, overwhelming their defenses with pure will. But as Orsina had told him, she was not a god.

From her hand extended a thousand hands, each finger tipped with a ragged claw. She saw the Emperor brace himself for the blow, pouring his strength into the shell of divinity around him, but no blow came. The hands streaming from her were not fists being flung to break him. They hit upon the shell, and they spread across its surface, scrambling like ants, searching with scratching fingertips for their way in.

She knew that he could feel them, that his stomach churned at the touch of their decaying spirits.

She knew that the cold radiating in from outside of his shell was filling him tremors and terrors.

She knew all of this, but she simply did not care.

She hungered.

The splayed hands of the dead went from gently probing at the shell's edges to digging in, scraping away at the places where different ideologies and beliefs had been fused together. Where the emperor had taken things that everyone already believed, and made them a part of his legacy, there were fine lines of perforation, and the fingers of the dead, they pried and they pulled. It was not pretty and it was not quick, but if the dead were anything, they were patient.

Terror washed over the Agrantine in waves. Their god, their leader, they could feel him go from confusion to confoundment to mounting anxiety as the impenetrable shield that he had wrapped around himself was stripped away. All of the power that their faith gave him began to falter, flapping around like loose ribbons in the air, hunting for something, anything to believe in. And there was Orsina, bald as their god, garbed in the same understated finery, hanging in the sky above them with the same victorious look on her face that their god used to wear.

They were a people who believed in living gods, who had been conditioned carefully to believe in them, and their infallibility, and now they believed that they looked upon another one.

Those flapping ribbons of faith tried to bind around Orsina, to trap her in the same strictures as had bound the emperor. She would not be their god. She did not want their faith. But that didn't mean she couldn't use it.

Deep within her soul, the hollow where shades had once been drawn was now a maw, gaping and slathering. The shades of Espher flowed slowly to it from across the lands, brief bright sparks consumed as another victim was claimed by the battlefield, but when the faith was drawn in, it was not stripped away so swiftly as life had been. More and more lines of faith fed into that maw, the ones coming from the disillusioned soldiers of Agrant, the hosts of them stretching out from Covotana, one dazzlingly bright line flowing to her from on dragon-back. Harmony in the sky.

They were not the full meal of a shade, but they were sustenance all the same. Swelling her with more power, with more life. An endless flow of life, drawn from the living and the dead now, from Yelena, from the faithful, from the shades that she consumed, all of it pouring through her empty heart and into the world of the dead. Filling the amalgam shade that they had all become with strength enough to do anything she desired.

All at once, the shell around the god-king came away. The prying fingertips slipped through. Inside his little bubble where he thought that he could never be touched, he was wheezing and crying now. Emotions pouring from him to wash over the battlefield, ruining what little hope his people had of surviving. The frost held him. Ice crystals grew all across each crease in his robes, his ears and nose were blackening at their tips, and his broad cheeks too were beginning to die.

The Emperor of Agrant may have lived as a god but he was going to die as a man, sobbing and begging and pissing himself in terror. And Orsina saw that this was good.

Her million shadows stretched out towards him, and he flailed helplessly with all of his power to no avail. He cried, he screamed, he begged. All of his grandeur cast aside as he became a little boy once more, praying and pleading that the monsters beyond the candle-light would not get him. But she would.

To say it was Orsina's will, or that of her gestalt shade, would be false. Both were one, combined and woven through both of the worlds that they occupied. But regardless of where the intent was born, the result was the same. She did not try to crush him with her strength, to burn him with blinding fire or freeze him with the chill touch of the grave. She simply extended her many hands down into the gaps that she had found within him and pulled apart.

Gibbets of flesh rained down over the battlefield. Fragments of bone no bigger than snowflakes, chunks of meat that would have made no more than a mouthful. This was the body of a god. This was what was left of it.

The Agrantine broke. Whatever hold their emperor had over their minds shattering with his death, they turned tail and ran for their lives, hunted by cavalry and wyvern alike. The battle was finished. The war was done. The Agrantine Empire, over.

Every one of them could have been allowed to flee. They were no danger now. Yet the soldiers who had faced them wanted what petty revenge they could muster. They wanted to see them run, to see them fearful and broken as well as beaten. It was not enough to win, they wanted to dominate.

It was an impulse that Orsina did not believe she had ever possessed until now. That desire to control not only her own fate, but that of everyone else. But it seemed insane to her that she had never truly considered the possibilities of it. She had all of this power dropped into her lap, she could make the whole world into what she wanted it to be. What did she have to fear?

Her thoughts no longer faded when she was not thinking them, they lingered in her mind, scribed into the raw flesh. Bleeding into every other thought. She could return to any one of them, but did not need to flit between them for recollection. Everything was already there. Everything that she had ever known. Everything that her shades had ever learned in their lives.

It should have been a deafening cacophony, were it not for the far louder demand within her drowning everything else out.

She hungered.

19 - The Spoils of Victory

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

From the outside, the winning blow of the war with Agrant was struck in almost an instant. One moment Orsina and the emperor were hanging in the air, the next he was gone and blood was raining down on his people.

Harmony had no clue how Orsina had done it. No clue what she could have done against that awful crushing will that they'd encountered before, but there could be no doubt that she had done it. All the Agrantine forces crumbled as the Arazi dashed on to hunt them down. Yelena, alone of all the dragons in the sky turned back towards Espher.

It was a slow and gentle sweep, bringing her in from the broad circle over the battlefield that she had taken as Harmony clambered her way up to the saddle towards Orsina, where she still hung in the air.

The emperor was gone. She must have been burning her own life to keep herself afloat, but she gave no sign of movement. Just cocked her bald head to one side, as though considering her next step. Harmony's arms caught her around the waist and she folded into her lover's lap. "You did it! I cannot say how or why, but you won!"

Still dazed, Orsina's answer came back almost too soft to hear. "I know."

Harmony wrapped her arms around Orsina and held her with all her strength. This had been their final test. The final awful battle before they could finally be at peace together. She did not need to tell Orsina now about her brother's plans for them to remain together. She didn't need to say anything at all, they had their whole lives to talk to one another, to share every passing thought and fancy. The Agrantine were defeated, the Arazi were their allies, all was finally going to be well.

It was fair enough that Orsina was too dazed to make much comment on this moment after the display of power she had just unleashed, but turning away from her, Harmony was shocked to see Kagan looking as grim as if they'd lost. "We just won! It's over!"

"Nothing's over until you're dead." He growled.

Harmony was too elated to let the old man's moaning bring her down. "Is it so terrible to celebrate? Orsina just killed a god! She saved us all!"

Yelena bucked as they passed over the city walls, the fires burning at its base lifting her ever so slightly. Kagan remained unmoved. “And who’ll save her?”

“What are you blathering about?” Harmony had been through so much already, she didn’t think that her heart could take any more. “After that display, nobody would dare challenge her again! We’re finally safe.”

As they rose, the full view of the city spread out before them. No houses were burning. No orphans had been made. The war had been contained to the battlefield. “The Arazi...”

“They’re on our side, just like you. I thought you of all people might have been happy to see that.” Harmony couldn’t believe him. He was so set in his ways that even when the whole world was turned on its head he wouldn’t believe a thing had changed. “If we’re all friends, that means that you might find some accord with them. You might be able to go home!”

“I’m already home.” His gaze lingered over Orsina for a long moment. “Besides, Konus doesn’t have friends. He has pawns.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Well Art seems to have won him over.”

This time, Kagan’s growl was more of a snarl, his snapped words biting at her. “And what do you think he traded to Konus to win him? What do you think he sacrificed, so that him and his precious kingdom could go plodding on a few more centuries?”

“Artemio...” She wanted to have faith in him. In the peace that they’d made with each other and with the love they shared. But the truth was the truth. “Would do anything for Espher.”

“Exactly.”

“He wouldn’t have...” She turned her gaze to Orsina, once more, and found that she was listening intently to the conversation instead of drifting off into whatever hazy place her exhaustion usually took her.

She looked almost resigned when she asked, “Wouldn’t he?”

“He would have to know that I’d never forgive him.”

“What would it matter?” Orsina sighed.

“It would matter because he is my brother.” Harmony was surprised to find tears pricking at the corners of her eyes. She couldn’t believe what they were saying. “I know that he’s a little cold, but he loves me. He would never...”

Kagan growled. “He’d sell you just as easy if you were what they wanted, and you know it.”

She hit him, but it was like swinging a punch into a brick wall. All it accomplished was hurting her wrist. “You don’t even know him!”

Kagan rose to his feet then, upon the dragon’s back, looming over her, but still showing no sign of anger in his countenance, though it would have been well deserved. There was more sadness in his voice than wrath. “I’ve seen enough of men like him. More than my fill of them.”

Harmony looked from Orsina’s blanked expression to Kagan’s pity and it burned her. “If you think he means us harm, why are you taking us back? Why aren’t we fleeing for the nearest border?”

Kagan slumped back down into the odd hunched posture he bore when riding on dragon back. “I’m not the one steering.”

Harmony seized on it. “Yelena doesn’t believe Art betrayed us?”

“No.” Kagan snorted. “She does.”

“She wants Konus dead.” Orsina should have been upset by this, she should have been scared, she should have been something. “She thinks I’ll kill him.”

“And?”

Orsina managed a smile then, the same soft smile that had melted Harmony’s heart when she first saw it. Now used to pleasantly declare her intent to murder. “And I will.”

One last beat of her wings brought Yelena to the palace gardens, and before she was even fully halted, Orsina was on the move. Kagan swung his leg over to follow him, but Harmony halted him with a tug on the back of his harness. “If this is what you think it is, we need a swift means to depart.”

He growled. “If Konus is there, she won’t face him alone.”

Harmony’s hand trailed down to squeeze his for the briefest moment. “No, she won’t.”

There were servants waiting to greet them as always, a huge hullabaloo of delighted courtesans who’d cowered in the palace while war was waged. Harmony had no time for them. Orsina didn’t even seem to notice them. The two of them breezed by at a swift trot. Heading down to the throne room, the great hall where Artemio would surely wait, and an answer to how he had made his peace with the Arazi too.

More servants, more pedants, more fools and bootlickers, they pushed them aside as they made their way down. There was none higher than them in the kingdom, none but the king

himself. The king who meant to be Orsina's husband if the rumors were true. It would serve none of the little people well to get in their way.

"Orsina." Harmony tried to catch her hand, but she always seemed to be just a step ahead. "Orsina! What are you going to do?"

She received no answer, nor comfort, it was as though Orsina was not there at all.

The doors to the audience chamber lay open for them, which was for the best given the pace at which Orsina was moving, trailed by the comet tail of courtiers and Harmony herself, just another bit of dust being carried along in her wake. If the doors had been shut, Harmony was half convinced that Orsina wouldn't have slowed, ploughing right through the wood.

Artemio sat upon his throne, still scribbling away in that little book of his. It was so incongruous that it almost made Harmony burst into laughter. There was a war going on at his doorstep, and here was Art with his nose in a book as always.

"What are you always writing in there anyway?" Harmony tried for laughter. Tried desperately to make this a normal day, a normal conversation, not the turning point on which their futures rested.

He met her nigh frantic gaze and he smiled. "This is my immortality. The day I die there'll be feasting and cheering. They'll spend a year glad I'm gone. Then the wolves will be at the door, and the first keep will fall, and someone will say 'that wouldn't have happened in his day.' A province falls and then another, and they'll cry out in my memory." He snapped the book shut and set it upon the arm of the throne. "Some vicious bastards will be faced with the hordes and think to himself 'What would Artemio Volpe have done?' Then he'll do it. Then the next man will do it. They'll teach me in schools. They'll make my evil thoughts a religion. I'll live as long as empires do. Then some dusty day the next monster with a fight on his hands finds my books, reads my thinking. I'll spread like a plague. Until I'm living in the head of every living thing in the world, forever."

With a groan of effort, Artemio rose to his feet. The empty sleeve dangling over his missing hand. The Volpe family sword hanging loose at his hip over his less than regal clothes. He might have looked like himself again for a moment, were it not for the sadness in his eyes. "People... they do not last. The only thing that matters is our legacy."

Harmony could feel every word like a stab to the heart. She couldn't believe that he truly thought that way. That he truly didn't understand that life as they lived it actually mattered. She

tried, so desperately to come up with the magic words to change his mind. To convince him that there was another way than the course that he'd laid out.

Konus stepped out from behind the shelter of the throne.

Harmony reached for her sword, Artemio reached for his, Orsina didn't move. Her dull gaze swept over Konus as though he were just another part of the furniture.

"Orsina." He had been her friend once, when she had been in a foreign land without anyone. He had tricked her into thinking that he was just like her. Young and lost. Harmony's blood boiled at the casual way in which he spoke with her. As if they were friends in truth. "We are both god-slayers now. Do you think that they will sing of our battle?"

Harmony stepped between them. "Do you think they'll sing about how I kicked your teeth out?"

Konus sniggered. "Quite a verse."

Harmony drew her blade.

Art stepped forward, placing himself well clear of Konus, but in her line of sight. He looked exhausted in a way that she had never seen him. "Harmony, please step aside."

Brother and sister met one another's gaze. She had refused to believe before. Refused, because to do otherwise would tear the foundations out from under her feet. He was her brother, he loved her, she knew this. All of her life, he had been there for her when nobody else had. They had lived their lives as exiles together. Always together.

This was not like their silly squabbling. This was not like their disagreements. This was her whole world. "Art, you can't do this."

She didn't think that she had ever seen him look so defeated. Not even when they had been backed into a corner with the Agrantine on one side and the Arazi on the other. "I am afraid that no better options presented themselves."

She raised her sword and pointed it straight at Konus. If she had hoped that she might capture his attention away from Orsina where his gaze was currently pinned, she was to be disappointed. "There are three of us and one of him. We can take him."

Art shook his head. "I would be forsworn."

"You think I give a shit about your honor!?" She had not meant to scream. Truly she had not. She had not meant for her voice to echo back and forth through the broad empty chamber. Nor for Artemio to look so stricken to see her heart breaking before him. Even now, she felt guilt at

putting herself first. It was not how things were meant to be, everything was about Artemio, she was the spare, the flask for him to drink from, the sword to guard his back. She was not meant to have a life of her own, loves of her own. She was meant to be just another shadow dancing behind him.

If it hadn't been for Orsina, that was all she ever would have been. Another tool for Artemio to draw out when he needed it. And whether she was alive or dead, she would have been bound to him, obedient to him. Nothing in herself. That had been their father's plan for her.

She would not submit to it.

There was a life beyond blind obedience. Beyond serving Artemio and spilling her blood and soul as he directed. She was not his sister; she was a living breathing person with dreams and hopes of her own. She would not submit. Never again.

She drew up to stand at her full height and she stared the kings of Espher and the Arazi down.

Once the echoes had faded, Art replied, still feigning sadness. "Perhaps not. But spare a care for the legions of dragons outside our walls and the fact that our army's strength is spent."

Harmony sneered. "Orsina can deal with dragons."

Orsina herself said nothing. She swayed on her feet as though a slight breeze might topple her. Konus stared at her, taking her measure. Deciding when to strike. He had killed gods before they said, burned them with his dragon's fire. She was just shadebound. The heavens had not birthed her. Her power was greater than the average shadebound, for certain, but she had spent so much, so quickly in her battles. Without her hair to hide it, her skull was visible through her skin. The outline of her jawbone where once she had the gentle heart shaped face Espheran women were famed for. Even her eyes seemed sunken into their sockets, surrounded by dark shadows. The eyes themselves darkened to almost black in the shadow of her brow.

Whatever ghost of the girl she had been that was still lingering in her countenance had died out there in the sky when she killed a god by rending him apart.

It had not escaped Art's notice either. He looked at her like a messenger horse fit only to be food for the hounds. "Orsina can barely stand from the looks of her. She's half corpse already." He continued, softer, meant only for Harmony's ears. "Let her go, there will be other girls."

The tears flowed freely now. Not of sorrow or despair as he might have guessed, but the same bitter burning tears that had burned at her eyes when they were children, and she was told that she was not allowed to do as her brother did. Frustration seeping from her eyes. "I love her."

He reached out his hand to her then. The one hand that he still had. It was empty as his promises had been. Even now, he thought that she would fold and obey him. "People like us, we do not have the luxury of love."

She slashed his palm with the length of her blade.

Hissing, he stepped back, cradling his injured hand to his chest. Royal blood pattered to the flagstones. This had been where their grandfather died, if Harmony remembered the story right. Stabbed in the back by those closest to him. She wondered now if it had been justified. She wondered if he was a complete bastard too.

Regardless of history, in the present, she had evened their odds. "If you run, I can slow them down." She moved between her love and the dragon-lord. "You can get back to Kagan, you can get away."

Orsina still had not moved a single muscle. She looked ethereal, so pale and strange without the hair to frame her face, with the ragged robes that had been through her hospice care and warfare. Not like a person at all, but like some figure in a shade-story. A shade herself. The lead lining the stained glass windows thrummed in harmony with her words. "We do not run."

Konus gave her a little round of applause at that. As though there were some audience to hear it. As though any of the people in this room were going to be walking away when this was all done. "Courageous to the last. But... You should have listened to her."

His jaw snapped open with such speed that it startled Harmony, even though she was expecting it, like he was a snake striking. Fire burst forth. A brief gout of smoke drifting up to rest upon the painted ceiling, then the blinding white bar of superheated light that they'd seen too often before.

There was no cunning to the attack, no trickery, only the overwhelming power of his breath. Coming straight for both Harmony herself and Orsina.

There was no time to dodge, no time to think, just the instant of seeing the light and then destruction.

Orsina's hand was outstretched. The lance of white flame shattered apart prismatically around it.

The beam split into dozens of smaller ones danced around the room as Konus closed the distance with them, still blasting away. Spinning as the angle of approach changed.

The columns that held up the vaulted roof were sliced apart. The stained glass windows lining the rear wall, depicting all the triumphs of the kings of Espher, shattered at a brush of the light. The throne of Espher for which generations had fought and died slid apart at an angle.

The fact that none of the four people in the room were diced like fresh venison was frankly miraculous. Or evidence that Orsina had more control over what she was doing than it seemed possible for anyone to have.

“Down.” Orsina said it as though it were an afterthought, yet Harmony felt her knees bending of their own accord. A strip of light buzzed through the air over her head as she dropped, searing away the air itself.

Across the other side of the divide, she could see Art on his knees too. But while she was stunned at what Orsina had just done to her, he was affronted. She’d saved his life despite his betrayal, and he was angry at her for pushing him out of harm’s way. Unbelievable.

Plaster fell from above them, the great artistic rendition of the sky above rendered back down to its base elements. Huge chunks of masonry that had been carved through soon followed, and those parts of the flagstones that had not already been divided by the cutting light found themselves shattered instead. After the initial command, Orsina had not spoken again, so Harmony took it upon herself to scurry out of the way of the falling debris, yet even she could not avoid taking some blows when the entire rear wall of the chamber was caved in from outside.

It was as though some great boulder had been fired from a slingshot into the palace, but the boulder was made instead of lashing tails and raking claws. Yelena and the Prophet, Konus’ bondmate, shattered through what was left of the wall after it had been sliced and diced. The larger dragon’s neck rearing back and striking time and again, seeking out not the soft underbelly of the dragon, but the comparatively tiny man who was scrambling across her surface.

Kagan lashed out at the dragon each time the Prophet lunged in. Spear in hand, he meant to skewer the beast even if it cost him his life, yet Yelena twisted and turned, bearing the brunt of the monster’s claws and teeth to spare him.

Each was intent on sacrificing their life for the other. A chaotic scramble of codependence with no end.

Artemio struck without warning while Harmony was still stunned by the catastrophe unfolding around her. Blinded by the lights. A lance of flame leapt from his bleeding hand towards her. His forge-shade that she'd kept watch while he collected, now turned against her. Or it would have been if it hadn't stopped dead just inches from her chest.

She cast a glance to Orsina to give her thanks, but the other woman was completely absorbed in what she was doing. Even if she had saved Harmony, she probably wouldn't have noticed doing it.

Konus had closed the distance with her, his lips peeling back, his teeth blackened stumps in his mouth. The sound of the air burning away from his breath must have deafened him, and the light must have been blinding him, yet he moved unerringly towards Orsina.

He was seeing things through the Prophet's eyes.

It set Harmony off running for the destructive tussle of buzzing scales and thumping wings. Konus impossible speed may have made him beyond her abilities to touch, but a dragon provided a far more ample target.

Art moved to stop her, but he was a one-armed man with a sliced-up sword hand. What was he going to do, bite her? "Stop."

She swiped at him, sending him staggering back, catching his heel on what had once been the arm of his throne. "Get out of my way or I'll hurt you."

"Harmony, you have to see the danger here." He was trying to reason with her. He was trying to use his big brain to make her obedient all over again, because he could see what she couldn't. He was so much better than her, so much smarter than her, she should just do whatever he said whenever he said it. He obviously knew what was best for her. Obviously.

"Oh I see it just fine." She snapped.

Her next thrust cut a line along his cheekbone. The kind of showy fencer's trick that should have scared any sensible opponent into submission, he just brought a hand up to press the skin shut.

"She is too powerful, Harm. People will tolerate shadebound because we have limits. Same with the dragon-lords. We are powerful, but we are not beyond the comprehension of mortal minds." He was still staggering back, still ducking under the stray blasts of blinding light radiating from where Konus and Orsina fought their quiet little war. "You saw what happened to Agrant when one man went beyond that. You saw what happened to the Arazi."

“She’s Orsina, Art.” Her scream came out strangled. As though his words were torture, and she supposed that in a way they were. The same way that a man could be tortured by drops of water falling from the ceiling of his dungeon to tap upon his skin. Each drop wearing away at his resolve, over and over again for years, until finally just the sound of a drop of water was enough to send him into paroxysms of terror. “She isn’t some imaginary monster or some god from a story for children. She’s never going to be what the Arazi are afraid of.”

His scrambling escape had come to a halt as his heels struck a fallen lintel from what had once been the arched roof. A swipe of a dragon’s tail as they rolled over one another had shattered it apart. In truth the whole ceiling of the palace looked to be tilting now, perhaps the whole structure. She could kill him where he stood, a single thrust and it would be over for them both. Yet still he would not look her in the eye. His gaze remained on Orsina. Not the dragons tearing through his palace. Not the god-slaying king of the Arazi. Orsina. Always. “She already is that which they fear. Look at her. *Really* look at her without the veil of love blinding you. Tell me what you see?”

It was a distraction to stop her running him through, obviously, but with the failure of his shades he’d proven himself entirely impotent to face her.

She did turn to look at Orsina then. To see Konus still unleashing that awful breath, only for it to be no longer deflected, but instead captured by the hand that she held outstretched towards him. What the god of Agrant had done, perfected. The raw heat of it roiled out across the room still, but her pristine hand was untouched. Even as Konus seared his own face away with the intensity of it, she had yet to even sweat.

From beneath her feet a great snowflake pattern fractal was spreading across the shattered remains of the flagstones. Ice and rock binding together to stretch out into ever wider and more complex designs. It made sense that her shades, things of the cold lifeless world, would hold heat at bay. What made less sense to Orsina was the stillness of her. She was Orsina, despite the loss of her scars, and weight and her hair, beneath it all the face was still the same. She was still the girl that Harmony had fallen for over one silly little lunch etiquette lesson.

Whatever Art saw, it wasn’t there. It was so figment of his imagination. He was the one who was blind. Orsina squeezed her hand tighter and tighter around the light and then with an awful tearing sound, she pulled.

The light was torn from Konus' mouth. The breath, torn from his lungs. He fell gasping to his knees before Orsina, hand scrabbling at his belt for the whip of bones dangling there. As if that would help.

Orsina loomed over him, and in that moment, Harmony saw what they were all so afraid of. For just one moment, she seemed to be shrouded entirely in shadows, the curved blade of burning light that she had summoned seemed to top a great scythe instead of her little sickles.

For just a moment, she was the very image of the Last King that they had seen in their storybooks. The reaper of souls. The end of all things.

Then, before the blade could make its descent and end the war with the Arazi in one fell sweep, a bolt of fire struck her.

Shadows that had seemed solid as the stone underfoot burst away from her like morning mist in the glow of Artemio's fire. Harmony scarcely managed to cry out in dismay before Artemio fired off another, again and again. She drew back her sword to skewer him through, to kill them both if that was what it took to save Orsina, but the blade tumbled from her suddenly numb hands.

Her vision darkened at its periphery, her whole world shrinking in around her once more until there was only Art. Always Art.

He held up his maimed hand and cast fire in a great stream from his palm, dousing Orsina from head to toe until she was hidden from sight, yet still he poured on more and more heat. He was spending more life in a moment than he had dared to spend in a lifetime before, his hair should have been greying. His body shriveling. Yet it seemed to leave no mark upon him. As though he too had tapped into some infinite source of strength as Orsina had in Yelena. For an instant, Harmony thought that he might have made some pact with Konus, to achieve the same endless font that Orsina had to draw upon, but it took her only one more faltering step to realize the truth. The font that he was drawing on was that of his impresario.

He was spending her life to kill Orsina.

The world before her eyes swam, but even through that, she could see her hands upon the broken stone of what had once been the palace. Her hands, wrinkled and withered like the skin of a chicken roasted for too long. Bones and veins visible through it as it thinned. Liver spots blossoming like watercolors.

She had trusted him so much that she had put her life into his hands, and this was how that trust was being repaid.

“Art.” Her voice came out croaking. A stranger’s voice that she was not meant to have heard for decades more. “Please...”

He did not even spare her a glance.

From the pillar of smoke and flame, Orsina burst forth. Her robes naught but smoke clinging to her now. The great scythe that she had forged in battle already swinging.

It passed between Harmony and her brother without touching either one. Yet abruptly, the awful drain came to a halt. Harmony’s life was her own again. Her body swelled back into shape. No longer cadaverous. She had lost decades still, but Orsina had snatched her back from the doors of death, severing the connection between her and her brother.

Just another impossible thing that she had done that day.

It meant Harmony had strength enough to raise her head just in time to see the whip of bones wrapping around her lover’s neck.

Konus was dragged forth from the smoke, straining to contain Orsina with nothing but strength of arms. “I have her!”

Orsina had a hand to her throat now, eyes widening as breath wouldn’t come. Straining against the whip, frost creeping along the length of it to blister and blacken Konus’ hands anew.

He spoke in Espheran, so that Artemio might react, but in the moment he was too busy clutching at his own chest as though his heart had stopped beating. There had been an instant when he was still casting his fire full force without thought to where the power was being drawn from, perhaps he had killed himself in that moment.

It seemed to matter little. The one who Konus was truly calling out to heard just fine.

With one last wild heave, the Prophet kicked Yelena clear. She smashed back through what was left of the chamber’s rear wall, dropping Kagan into the rubble, and landed in the pools beyond with a splash and a crack as the stone gave way beneath her weight. Then the dragon was there, head cocked, mouth opened wide, that familiar white glow building in its mouth.

“Finish it!” Konus grunted out.

Kagan did.

From where he had been cast down, he sprinted forward. The Prophet was a giant even by the standards of the Aslinda, its head as broad as that giant of a man stood tall, but like all

dragons, it was ultimately just an animal, and that meant that enough force applied in the right place could end its life.

The spear that had never left his hand swept up, piercing through the small scales beneath the titanic reptile's chin, out through its mouth where it hung open, then onwards and upwards into the roof of its mouth. All of the overdeveloped muscles in a dragon's head were used to bite down. It had no strength to resist as he went on rising, catching his shoulder under the dragon's chin and forcing its jaws shut.

With its mouth pinned closed, there was nowhere for the fire to go, but to wash back down its throat into the very venom glands that had produced it. Konus and the Prophet met each other's eyes for but a moment, before he whispered. "Hayir."

His head exploded apart. The dragon's too. Both showering the chamber with gore, bone and a wash of flame. Harmony ducked her head as a bloody hunk of scaled meat soared by and a piece of horn knocked Art clean off his feet.

The usual tickle of life leaving her body to flow into him and heal his injuries was nowhere to be found. Whatever Orsina had done, it was permanent.

Dragging herself upright once more, she finally saw the tableaux laid out before her, Kagan on his knees, scorched black down one side. The bodies of the Arazi leader and dragon alike laid at his feet, and above them both, the rising shades of the dead.

It was said that great men, and creatures, left behind a shade when they departed while lesser folk did not. In truth, Harmony suspected that these allegedly great men were just more accustomed to being seen by others, and had an expectation that it would carry on beyond the veil of death.

Konus and the dragon looked no different as shades than they did in life, each one in a physical prime that they had never elected to leave. Harmony could see through them to the glimpses of sky beyond the shattered walls. To the ruins of the throne room too. They were there, but not as real as they had been in life. Not to her anyway.

But to Orsina it seemed the arrangement was different. She drifted up from where she had stood. Shadows fluttering around to clothe her as the last tattered remnants of her robes fell away to ash. She rose into the air, reaching out to both dragon and man, and when they took note of her and tried to flee she barely had to move to snatch hold of the both of them and drag them back towards her.

They struggled with all of their might, but she had a point of leverage that they lacked, she was still anchored in the world of the living, and that gave her all that she needed to drag their shades down.

Inch by awful inch Orsina brought them down, closer and closer to where her lips sat parted, as though she were consumed by thirst. Tremors shook the palace as parts of the building began to collapse above them, the loss of so much structural support finally echoing up. More plaster and masonry tumbled down to scatter across the chamber floor.

Konus himself made contact with her first, chill winds sweeping across the floor in waves as his power became a part of Orsina's. He was just another shade to bend to her will, like so many before, all the easier for the connection that they already had. The dragon, Harmony would have expected to be more difficult when it was drawn into the swirl of shadows that spun around Orsina, but it was swallowed down with infinitely more ease, as though there were already a dragon shaped hole in her soul just waiting to be filled.

The last thing that Harmony saw before a fresh wave of cold knocked her from her feet again was Orsina's perfect face at the center of it all. The corners of her lips curled up into that same secret smile she had always saved only for Harmony. The contentment.

It promised that no matter what darkness her exhausted body dragged her down to, her dreams would be sweet.

20 - Let Loose the Wyvern of War

Caldo, Regola Dei Volpe 1

Kagan had not even waited for the body of his father to still before he ran out into the night air to help Yelena. He had neither the size or the strength to pull her from the shattered terracotta heap that was all that remained of the palace fountains but he did have the presence of mind to reach her, even when she was lost to her own thoughts.

It is finally over.

She was not too badly hurt to move, or too exhausted, she was simply lost in the bliss of the moment.

All these years, these centuries, we have waited for our vengeance upon him, and at last it is done. By your hand.

He slumped down to sit beside her. To let the healing energy of her endless life begin to close the burn running down the length of him. For the first time in what felt like forever, he closed his eyes. “It wasn’t vengeance.”

He stole our lives from us. He stole our people from us. He stole our destiny. Who was better deserving of vengeance than Konus the Headless.

Kagan grunted at the distasteful name but couldn’t deny any of the rest. He couldn’t help but wonder what name his own people would have granted him for such an act. Kagan the Kinslayer?

Kagan the Liberator.

“They don’t even know that they’re free. The minute they work it out, they’ll start burning this place down.”

What care we for the people on the ground. We have all the skies to roam now. All of our people, have all of the skies to roam now. The nightmare is over.

“What care... We’re the people on the ground, Yel. We’re the ones who’re going to be burning.”

There isn’t an army strong enough to bring your daughter down now.

“She isn’t...”

Can’t lie to a heart-reader.

He groaned and let his head sink into his hands, even though that meant disturbing the crusting scabs already coating one side of it. He winced but didn't move his hands. He'd had worse burns than this before he'd learned to walk.

All of his empathy, he'd pulled back into himself through the fight. The connection with Yelena never faltered no matter what he did, but the rest was coming creeping back in now. The dread throughout the city. The anticipation. Espher might have thought that the fight was done, but the Arazi were spoiling for war. The moment that they learned Konus' fate, they would rain their vengeance down upon Covotana and all of Espher.

He could stop that, he supposed. Go out there. Talk to them. Tell them that their prophet was a liar and their leader was dead and they could go wherever they wanted but they couldn't stay here. He supposed he was the leader of Arazi by rights of inheritance, if anyone north of Espher believed in that nonsense, or by right of conquest, if any of the old Arazi from the days before Konus took over were still lingering around.

He dragged his mind back into his head and tried to remember what they were talking of. "She isn't for war. She's..."

A soft kind heart, who tears gods to shreds and claws the air from men's lungs?

He turned his head then to look at her, she was still just standing there in the midst of all the destruction that he'd brought down on her. If he had just left her alone in her little hut in the woods, none of this would ever have happened. She wouldn't have become a slayer, she wouldn't have had to come to the city, she could have lived as normal a life as someone born like her could live, like old Mother Vinegar had. He'd brought doom down with him from the steppes, and in trying to make a life for himself, he'd poisoned hers.

Her fate was her own. Her direction set and her wings beating, long before you spoke a word to her.

"She was just a little girl."

And you were just a little boy, and I a hatchling. We change. We grow. We grow strong. Why do you fear her growing strong? How else can you be sure that she'll be safe when we're gone?

Groaning once more, he settled back against her. He'd done more acrobatic nonsense in the last hour than he had in the past decade or more. His body might still have been fit and healthy, but that didn't mean that such things wouldn't take a toll on him. "Wasn't planning on being gone."

We should go to the Arazi. Make our case. Offer them the future they were denied.

It was not easy to lie to his dragon, even harder to speak in half truths. His doubts bled through long before his lips had formed the words, “And if they don’t want it?”

There was no point in trying to close the doors of his mind, they were touching skin to scale, everything he thought echoed in her head, everything he felt wormed its way out. He didn’t have the heart to argue with her anymore.

She took that to mean that she had won. *Everyone wants utopia.*

Despite how bone deep his exhaustion ran, as his body drained everything from him to close up the massive wound that covered half his body, Kagan pushed with his legs and slid slowly up Yelena’s side. “Everyone wants food in their belly and a warm place to rest.”

Now that he was in motion, she felt the impetus to move too, twisting her long neck around so that she could look at him, even if it was upside down because she remained laying on her back. *They will see the virtue in what I offer them. The whole world will be ours.*

Kagan scoffed. “If they don’t kill us on sight, they’ll work out that Konus is dead and kill us then.”

You know how to empty your head.

“I’m good, not perfect.” The dragon cocked her head to the side as though conceding his flaws were real. Still upside down. “Neither are you. If you were perfect, you’d have killed the Prophet the first time you tried.”

She took that moment to roll over, moving as languorously as she could, as though the heap of rubble she had been resting on were a patch of soft moss. More importantly, the delay allowed her to ignore what he’d just said to her. When she realized that he was still looking up at her, expecting an answer, he felt a tinge of irritation wash out from her. *They are our people. They will listen to us.*

“That girl in there. She is our people.” Kagan found one of the tattered leather strips that had once been a full harness and started hoisting his way up her, even as she rumbled and complained when it pinched and pulled at her. “If we had any sense, we’d take her, fly away from here and never look back.”

He stopped abruptly when he reached her shoulders, finding that her long neck had twisted all of the way around so that she could face him head on. *You might have forgotten your own kind, but I have not.*

There was a challenge there, but it wasn't one he meant to answer. He had forgotten what it meant to be Arazi. He'd pruned it away so that he could go on living alone in the world beyond. And the rest of them... he couldn't even begin to imagine what it had been like to live under his father's thumb for all of this time. The contortions that they must have put themselves through. The ways that the word Arazi itself would have changed to reflect Konus' whims.

Instead of rising to her challenge, Kagan sighed. "They're going to riot."

Amusement tickled over his skin like feathers. Itchy where he'd been burned, but otherwise a pleasant sensation that just didn't fit. *Then let them riot, it is their right after centuries enslaved.*

She wasn't stupid and she wasn't blind. She knew exactly what he'd been saying. "And Covotana?"

They are not our people.

Her breath vibrated through his bones as she started to beat her wings. As she readied herself for flight once more. No matter what he said, she meant to go to the Arazi and make her grand stand, she had better odds of survival with him there to speak her thoughts into words. To take the weight of her meaning and translate. As with so many things with Yelena, it was inevitable. As she took flight, Kagan cast one last glance back to Orsina, only to realize that she was gone. While he had been off arguing with Yelena, she'd slipped out of the room, leaving the brawling twin idiots to sleep it off. Probably for the best.

"Your territory. Your people. Your plan for the world says that's exactly what they are."

They rose, oh so slowly they rose. And as they rose, the city spread out before them. All those people, still simmering with fear. It prickled at Kagan's senses. It was a tinderbox just waiting for the first spark. Still Yelena was making her justifications, as much to herself as to him. *This was temporary. A landing, not a roost.*

Kagan was not so willing to let her vague excuses slide. "Not sure that's what you had me promise them."

They rose until the Arazi came into sight. All about the city walls they lingered, waiting for their leader to return with the head of their greatest enemy. Instead, they would find Kagan and Yelena. Ancient betrayers brought back to life as harbingers of the end. Because this was the end of the Arazi, one way or another. From this day on, everything would change.

Another army would have borne torches by which to see, but wyvern and dragon alike saw well in the dark, and the once human Arazi had co-opted that trait. It was how Kagan could make out the sheer number of them. Pressing in from all sides.

What do you want from me Kagan? You want me to die for them? Yelena snapped her jaws at a passing dove. *We will offer the Arazi peace and freedom, and if they choose otherwise, then they will bring war to your girl and she will reap them.*

He had shamed her, and now she meant to antagonize him in turn. Kagan growled, “I already told you...”

Another snap of her great jaws. The hissing shift in pressure as her venom glands began to refill. *What you want doesn't matter. There is only that which is.*

“And your dream.” He scoffed.

My dream, the future for our kind, that which is. That which will be. I shall make it so.

They soared high above the city now, riding the thermals still rising from the houses down below. The heat captured in the terracotta roof tiles. The hearth fires and the flesh and blood people who tended them, all giving her lift.

People that she knew were going to die when the Arazi found out about Konus. People that she did not care were going to die, because they were different enough from her that she did not see them as people. The words slipped out before he could stop them. The sentiment already clouding around his heart where he knew she could feel it. “How are you any different from Konus?”

On any other day, at any other time, she would have taken those words like a dagger to the heart. But now, still basking in her glorious victory against her oldest foe, Yelena almost took pleasure in mocking the idea. *I will set right what he did wrong. I will free them to live according to their nature.*

Kagan still wasn't willing to let it go, even as the vast thunder lizards grew larger and larger at their approach, until he realised that the greatest of them stood level with the walls of the city, its muddy brown eyes peering at the terrified defenders. “Your version of it.”

Nature does not change.

“Everything changes, everything grows.” He replied, reaching for a fresh spear as they approached the wall, and realizing too late that they had all been spent. “You just said that.”

Her conviction was deafening. A lead weight dropped into the conversation. Something so unshakeable that she felt like nothing Kagan could say might dislodge it. *Aslinda are eternal.*

“Rain wears mountains into new shapes.” He was not the same as he once had been either. Where before, he would have taken the warrior’s path every step of the way, he was older and wiser now. He did not need to attack everything head on. He did not even need to fight. He could simply slip around most problems now that he didn’t feel the need to hammer his way through them.

We are not so pliable as stone.

Very deliberately she tucked her wings in tight against her sides and began her descent towards the gathered Arazi. Kagan would not have guessed that they were the Arazi command, or even chieftains of any rank, but they were the closest, and if all went to her plans, then such things as rank would no longer have any meaning. Yelena probably believed that she was making a statement.

Rising in his stirrups as they dropped, Kagan held himself upright as she swooped to a halt above the gathered wyvern riders, then he opened his mouth, and let her use him as her mouthpiece.

“Konus is dead by my hand.”

She had a way of breaking news gently.

Whatever she had meant to say next, he would never know. Shouting and screaming picked up among the Arazi, spreading slowly out among the ranks. Rippling faster than his eye could follow. But with his other senses, he could track the wave of dismay, disbelief. Disbelief proven wrong the moment that he was recognized. The one who consorted with the Adversary. The one who slept under the mountain. An enemy that Konus would never have let live if he still lived. Their very existence proved her claim.

Dismay gave way to horror, to confusion, and then, with inevitability, to anger.

Kagan opened his mouth to speak once more, only to find the breath stolen from him as Yelena banked aside and a spear as thick around as a tree trunk soared by where she had been, launched from some thunder-lizard’s thagomizer, re-purposed into a great arrow-throwing sling. Natural spikes filed down to make room for the new fittings.

This was the world that Konus had made, living flesh carved into weapons of war, and Yelena thought that everyone would just return to their nature now that he was gone?

She beat her wings hard and fast then, trying to gain height, but in the night sky with no city beneath her, it was not so easy a feat to rise. Spears were being flung up at her now, and she had none of the maneuverability to escape them. Some struck off her scales harmlessly. Others stuck between. She was too high for the earthbound throwers to have enough force for a killing throw, but that did not mean it hurt her body almost as much as her ego.

“We need to go. Now.”

Still she flapped and lingered and he could feel her indecision. This was not what she had wanted. It was not what she had expected. At long last the monster who had haunted her dreams was dead. Why weren't her people celebrating? Why weren't they applauding her great victory?

He had to bellow to be heard over her thunderous wing-strokes. “Yel, we need to go!”

His certainty carried more weight than her indecision, snapping in a wing to her side, she spun away, letting gravity force some speed into her motions and then spreading wide to glide up past the snapping jaws of the long-necked thunder lizard already stamping its forelegs against the walls of Covotana.

The walls shook as the Arazi assault began. Walls built to withstand siege engines and millennia of storms, crumbling apart under the weight of the vast beasts of war come to crush them. As they fled back to the safety of their roost with spears soaring after them, Kagan saw the first charge of the vast wyverns with their armor plated heads lowered to the eastern gates.

Wood could hold off a battering ram for a time, but not creatures like this. Only a moment after their passing he heard the gates splinter. The guards beyond it would have been crushed alive, either by the toppling of the gates or the stampede that followed.

Whatever accord that Artemio had made with the Arazi was over, the invasion of Covotana had begun anew.

There was no real comparison for the sounds of a city being laid to waste. The screams were familiar enough, the clash of steel, the crackle of flame. But run together with the battle cries, and the roars of the war beasts, the thunderous stampede of feet on streets, the walls cracking and the roof tiles raining down, invasion had a sound entirely its own.

It echoed in Kagan's ears.

For all that he had argued with Yelena, the truth remained, these were not his people. The only one he cared about at all was Orsina, though he supposed that her little friend was growing on him too. There would be no defense mounted against the Arazi, because they were already

inside the walls. There would be no peace that could be reached with them, because they were a headless snake, writhing around in paroxysms of death.

This is just the beginning. They will calm. They will come around to...

For not the first time, Kagan wished that Yelena was human sized for a moment so he could slap her and have her feel it. “We killed Konus. Being a slayer was bad, imagine what this is going to be like. A crime so high we didn’t even have a word for it.”

There is still hope. All that we need to do is...

He cut her off before she could launch them into another argument when they really had no time for it. “There! Orsina.”

Before her battle with the Agrantine god and Konus, he would have recognized her anywhere, but now, anyone would be able to tell at a glance who she was. Even in the dark of the night the shadows around her were thicker, an almost luxurious velvety darkness like you might find in a cave somewhere that the sun had never touched, a darkness so deep it seemed more like the absence of all things than the obstruction of sight.

Without prompting, Yelena began to dive towards her. Perhaps she did not mean to push Orsina into combat, perhaps it was simply instinct, making her want to be close to her bondmate in a time of crisis, but Kagan did not trust it.

He was thrown from the saddle but a moment later. Yelena had stopped dead as though they had ploughed into a cliff-face. Her whole body contorted in an agony that spread through their bond to him. He tumbled along her neck and would doubtless have fallen if she had not jerked her head around to catch him in her mouth.

He caught hold of her pronounced incisors, still twisting and falling as she too began to tumble down from the sky. All it would take would be one jolt to snap her jaws shut and split him in three. Hitting the ground would definitely constitute a jolt. He could not see how it was done, but Yelena pulled them out of their chaotic pirouette to the ground, claws hooking on rooftops as her wings frantically hammered up and down. He slipped further into her mouth as she desperately tried to gain height once more, and he considered it to be an improvement.

Disgusting.

He laughed, even as he slipped and struggled to stay out of her airway. “Doubt you taste any better about now.”

They hit the ground and the jaws that could have sundered him into pieces snapped shut up ahead. Leaving him for one moment in a world of dark, warm, moisture. Then she disgorged him with all haste, the muscular tube of her throat rippling and inadvertently spritzing him with venom as he was tossed up and out.

She repulsed us.

“Might not know which dragon was swooping her.”

We live, so she knew.

The thunder lizards had not made it so far into the city yet, but the wyvern and Aslinda who could fly were already beginning to fill up the sky, and dragon’s breath was already bathing where they passed. At least there would be no difficulty in catching a thermal when the time came to escape.

We are not leaving.

“No, we’ll just stay here and fight off the whole Arazi army ourselves.”

We do not need to. We are protected.

A blinding light passed over them then. That same dazzling white of Konus’ breath, forged into a sickle blade and flung through the sky. Each wyvern that it struck fell into parts. Each Aslinda that it brushed went tumbling to crash into the already half-ruined city.

It was hard to deny that Orsina was protecting them after that.

The deepest shadow where she dwelled moved on across the city without Orsina even casting them a backwards glance. She was not heading for the eastern wall where the Arazi ran riot, but somewhere else. Disoriented from their fall from the sky, it took Kagan a moment to realize where.

“Heading for the school. The House of Seven Shadows.”

Perhaps she means to rally the necromancers.

Kagan didn’t believe it, and in her heart, neither did Yelena, but all that they could do was follow after her, maintaining a respectful distance.

Atop the shattered walls, around the curve of the dormant volcano on which the city lay, the defenders were being slaughtered wholesale. Dotted among them were the shadebound who had been committed to the battle, and as far as Kagan could tell, they were putting up a stalwart defense, but they were so few, and the enemy so many. Sheer weight of numbers bore even the most potent of them from their posts. The much-vaunted necromancers of Espher, capable of

stilling whole armies with their command of the dead, were helpless in the face of the titanic beasts that the Arazi called kin.

They needed a miracle.

The grand avenues of Covotana with their fountains and canals were more than wide enough for Yelena to walk along freely, though Kagan could feel her discomfort at walking instead of soaring. Aslinda had strength and stamina enough to walk hundreds of miles, but not one of them would ever choose to. Being pinned to the ground by the pull of the earth always felt wrong to them, tantamount to the kind of imprisonment they all loathed so deeply.

More flashes of light seared by. Lightning without the thunder. Making it abundantly clear that the sky was no safe place to be right now. Kagan, having clambered back into his natural place, now lay low against Yelena's back as they wove their way through the city.

In the beginning the streets had been clear. The citizens of the city trusting in their walls to protect them, cowering in their homes and hoping that someone would come to save them. By now it must have been becoming apparent that they were on their own. The walls had served less as a dam against the coming tides of war, and more like a tide break, slowing the flow of Arazi into the city, breaking up the unstoppable force of their approach, but leaving the streets flooded all the same.

Now even the most humble citizens of the city seemed to have recognized that the situation was beyond hope. That the people that they had debased themselves for in exchange for protection had failed them utterly.

They had no swords or shields, no armor or horses, yet they came out holding what they had, broomsticks and pans, kitchen knives and chair-legs. Their worlds were collapsing around them, and instead of cowering in fear, they had taken to the streets.

More than that though, they seemed to be organized on a level that Kagan would never have predicted. There seemed to be leaders among them, already designated and guiding them. As though this spontaneous militia had been arranged long before the war came to the city.

They parted with all good grace to allow Kagan and Yelena through. There was no hint of a threat from them, yet still he could feel the scales down the back of his neck shifting uncomfortably in their gaze. There was something strange going on here, and if it were not for more pressing matters it would have concerned Kagan even more. As it was, he had to keep

moving, and pretended not to notice the peasants of Espher closing into ranks behind him, positioning themselves between the Arazi and Orsina.

Yelena must have felt the same discomfort, as she picked up her pace until they were so close enough behind Orsina that she was actually in earshot. Kagan called out to her the moment that he could but received no response. It didn't even surprise him at this point, only made him sad.

She was practically on the doorstep of the House of Seven Shadows now, where he had delivered her back when they first came to the city. There outside the gates was the old Prima, just as had been there on that first night. She was talking to Orsina. Orsina was talking back. All too soft for Kagan to hear. They went on creeping in closer, trying to work out what was going on, but in an instant it became all too clear.

The shadows around Orsina twisted out, and the old woman went soaring through the air. Barely touched by the shades but overwhelmed by their power.

She is not taking from us.

The old woman managed to find her feet again, out on the brown grass between the city and the House, one arm dangled limp and useless while she held up the other as though she were pleading and begging with Orsina to stop.

Orsina did not stop.

A lash of blinding white tore out from amidst the tide of shadows around her, and only an abrupt burst of lightning from the Prima was able to deflect it from its course, sending it skittering off across the gardens to rend the outer wall from its foundations.

She feeds her shades for this power, but the life is not coming from us.

Kagan frowned, and pressed the palm of his hand to his chest, where he had always felt the tug when Orsina was calling up fire and wind. There was nothing. He closed his eyes, tried to reach out through their empathic connection, but there was nothing there either. As though the bond had been cut. And cut so cleanly that he hadn't even noticed its absence until now. "How?"

She has found another source.

The Prima of Septembra was fighting for her life, bringing every one of her shades to bear, walls of stone erupted from the earth, lightning struck down at Orsina from clouds freshly formed overhead, the old woman had even drawn a blade from the cane that she had been leaning on and held it ready, as though the battle between them would be settled with fencing.

Of all those frantic attacks, only the lightning struck home, hitting Orsina square in the chest and then vanishing entirely. It should have killed her, but she had already walked through so many things that should have killed her that day that one more scarcely seemed to matter. Coils of the lightning flickered within the dark cloud of shadows around her, coruscating up and down her bare arms.

With the distance closed, the Prima made one desperate thrust for Orsina's heart, only to have her catch the blade between her palms.

The lightning discharged then, carried along that length of metal to strike at the old teacher. All of the damage it had failed to inflict upon Orsina was paid back to the one who had cast it. Her skin blackened and burned, blood poured in copious dollops from her ears and her eyes. Then just as she began to scream, Orsina seemed to grow bored of the little game.

Stepping past the Prima, she headed for the House of Seven Shadows itself.

Whatever else the old woman might have been, Kagan felt certain that she was a warrior. Even crushed by an enemy of superior strength, she did not hesitate to launch one final bolt of lightning at Orsina's back as she walked away.

Once more, the lightning struck home, rippling out across Orsina's bare back. Driving the darkness away for a moment.

When Orsina glanced back, Kagan could have sworn that his blood had been switched with ice. There was nothing of the girl that she had been in that expression, none of the kindness or compassion, none of the curiosity or rebellious spirit. Only disdain.

The Prima tore apart at the seams. Skin sloughing off her back and her front as her limbs were torn from their sockets. Blood filled the air in a cloud around her, and then as abruptly as it had been done, it was over. The flayed skin flapping down to land in a wet heap on the gravel path, and Orsina moving on.

Experience had gone up against raw power, and power had won out, the same as it did every time.

Kagan had been pinned in place by the stare, but now he managed to mumble out, "Something is wrong. The shades, they've taken her over. This isn't her."

Rain wears mountains into new shapes.

Just one good slap to the face, it would set so much to rights.

“It doesn’t turn stone to water.” He growled out, urging Yelena on even though she seemed quite intent on staying back from Seprombra even though Orsina had already slipped inside out of sight. “She isn’t... she was never cruel. She never had that in her.”

It is now.

Even over the catastrophic sounds of an invasion in progress, the sounds from within the building were deafening. Just as the beams of light that she had fired were so bright they left afterimages still burned across Kagan’s vision, the concussions from within Septombra were so loud that all else fell to silence in their wake. The fighting was still going on, the dragons were still strafing the city and the people were still being burned alive, but all that Kagan could hear was a high pitched whine in his ears. He reached up to cover them and his hands came away wet and bloody. “What?”

Another explosion threw the House’s roofing clean off the top as though the old stone had shrugged off a cowl. It came clattering down into the new silent world where Kagan stood.

You cannot hear?

Rubble scattered all around them, and Yelena had to raise a wing to fend off an offending piece of shattered tile winging its way towards Kagan.

“What is happening?” He may have been whispering or shouting, it mattered little. Yelena would hear him even if he made no sound.

The dragon lowered her head until it was level with him. *Screams. Inhuman. Not her. Something else. Suffering.*

Once more, Kagan felt the earth shake beneath his feet and gawked as the wooden additions to the old stone building caught alight, not like a spreading fire, but like a dragon had just exhaled across them all at once.

From the exploded roof their emerged a blur of papers, feathers and motion, only partially visible as it distorted his view of the clouds beyond. It made it a good distance from the House before it struck upon the same invisible barrier that had knocked Yelena from the sky and followed much the same trajectory that she had. It recovered well and was airborne once more before the vast shadows stretching up from the hole where the top half of the House used to stand latched onto it.

Here and there Kagan thought that he could see hands grasping at it, claws raking at it, but just as likely there was nothing there at all but tendrils like a sea-jellies. It was impossible to tell

after an instant anyway, shadow and formless shapes all blending together as the bird, if that was what it had been, was drawn down into the mass and vanished.

Another great concussion swept over them, knocking Kagan flat onto his back and making Yelena wince down and dig in her claws.

Four.

Those few students who had been still lingering in the school while the rest of their kind went to war were flooding out of the doors now, some injured, others carrying their dead friends with them. They saw Yelena there, looking like every nightmare that they'd ever had, and they ran right for her all the same. Kagan had pulled himself back upright and was wishing for a spear to throw, but he need not have bothered. The students split as they reached Yelena and flooded past her. Tears stained down sooty faces. Blood ran from every ear. Some seemed to be screaming or wailing, others looked as though they were hemorrhaging years, hair turning white even as they tried to escape. Maybe using what shades they had bound to accelerate their departure.

She is hunting shades.

"How could you know that?" Kagan's head was beginning to pound now, in time to his heartbeat. The silence of his burst eardrums may have been a small blessing so he no longer had to endure whatever other screaming was going on, but the pain of the injuries was beginning to gain on him, even with his palms flattened across Yelena's back and all of the healing and regeneration that they could muster flowing back and forth through them.

The little humans screamed it as they passed. She is hunting them, eating them.

"That makes no sense." Kagan pressed his hands over his ears, groaning. "You can't eat..."

The aging ones, she tore theirs away.

Kagan opened his mouth to argue, but the scene up the slope distracted him. From out of the main doors of the now crumbling House of Seven Shadows lurched a suit of antique armor. The helmet had been lost somewhere in whatever scuffle had brought it to the outside, and with its absence, the fact that the suit contained no human became immediately apparent.

Of all the strange sights that they had seen that day, the living armor scarcely registered as strange, but what followed was enough to fill Kagan with dread. What followed was Orsina.

The House of Seven Shadows collapsed into a heap as she departed, as though she were the only load bearing wall still intact in the place, and she moved now not like a girl, but like the

predator that Yelena had been trying to describe, like a wyvern on the hunt. Stalking after the moving armor as it stumbled away. They were closer to her than Yelena wanted to be. All her scales rippling in discomfort as Orsina spoke, still in that sweet soft voice that Kagan had always known. “Not good enough.”

The armor held up its gauntlets, trying to fend her off but with a slash of her hand the greaves were torn out from beneath it. Legless, it hit the ground, arms still working, trying to drag it backwards across the grass to be away from her. As though it still had any hope of escape.

“Now, who isn’t good enough?!” She called after it, plunging her hands forwards. The chestplate of the armor shuddered and then tore right down its center, right down its strongest point, and inside there was the suggestion of a shape, barely visible to Kagan’s eyes.

Orsina shucked it from its armor like an oyster and then swallowed it down. Her physical body never coming into contact with any part of it, the shadow-hands of her shade doing all of the work. As the half-seen mote of light passed between her lips and she bit down. The world shook again. Another great shade, a spirit that had persisted through the centuries, destroyed and devoured.

“Orsina, stop.” Kagan blurted it out without any rational thought. Only horror at what she had become.

“I’m not yours to command, Kagan.” She met his stare head on, with none of the self-effacing courtesy that a life of being small and weak had taught her. “I’m nobody’s.”

Yelena spoke through him then, overwhelming him in her excitement. “*You are your own, a ruler in your own right. Queen of All.*”

Orsina spat on the ground. “No. No more queens. No more kings. No dragon lords or gods.”

Kagan’s jaw cracked as he tried to fight against the words being spoken. “*Whatever you want to be called, we will follow you.*”

Orsina shook her head, as though she too were fighting the awful buzzing in her ears that rendered him deaf, hearing only through Yelena. “Kagan... you were the best friend I ever could have hoped for in this world. You demanded nothing and offered everything that you had.”

Kagan managed to force his own words out, though Yelena fought him for every syllable. “I’m still your friend. But you need to...”

She cut him off with a glance. “Because you were my friend, I am giving you a head start.”

He stared at her mystified for a moment, until she made her meaning clear. “Run.”

She pushed him. Her power, raw and unshaped, washed over him and Yelena, and the dragon was torn from the earth and sent skidding back. All the way back to the gates of the House gardens. Yelena, furious to be manhandled so tried to take a step forwards only to freeze in place as shadows flitted over them, not the impossibly dark shades that Orsina commanded, but something vast on high, casting a pall over all three of them. Orsina cried out once more. "Run!"

The Aslinda descended upon her en masse. All that remained of the legions that had once blotted out of the sky, still numbering in the hundreds. They came one after another, swooping down to bathe her in flames. One, then the next, then the next, flights crisscrossing over the point where she stood pouring all of their ire and wrath down upon her.

A pillar of flame filled Kagan's vision, burning bright as the sun as the Arazi added more and more venom and flame to the mix.

The ground where they had stood was blackened and lost in the waves of smoke. The claw marks Yelena had dragged across the earth filled with burning venom. If Orsina had not cast them aside they would have been consumed, yet still Kagan urged Yelena on. "We have to save her!"

It is the Arazi who need rescue.