

A Pair of Pairs
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112

When the twin kings sent a summons, there was no polite way to decline unless you were prepared to part ways from your head. For a child of the Volpe line, there were few polite ways to accept either. To say that the Familia Volpe were pariahs in high society was an understatement of epic proportions. It had been a generation since they had attended a ball in the palace, two since they'd claimed their empty seat in the Teatro Dei Signori. Artemio's father had been heard to remark that it was the price one paid for being a living descendant of the true king, but only when he was in his cups and sure that even the servants couldn't overhear.

The Cerva had ruled for as long as anyone living could remember, and it was in their best interests to maintain the illusion that their line stretched back into antiquity rather than terminating abruptly a century or so before in one bloody night. As a student of history, Artemio was all too aware how often crowns changed hands through such circumstances. It made it difficult to feel much indignance. Luckily, Artemio harboured grudges the way other men ate meals. He had indignance to spare.

Harmony had come begging with him not to go to the palace before the grey light of dawn was even rise over the city.

She came hammering at his chamber door in the House of Seven Shadows while he was still dressing himself. Of all the skills that he had learned since coming to the city to begin his studies, he valued his newfound ability to go from one outfit to another without the involvement of servants to be the most useful. Even if he never graduated, he would not have to suffer the rough hands of a knight of the wardrobe again. It felt like a small victory against mother each time he fastened a button for himself.

"Let me go in your stead. You are heir, I am a less valuable hostage." She had started before she even had the blindfold off her eyes.

"Harm," He scoffed, "If they'd wanted a hostage they would have come in force. Not sent some mongrel servant with an invitation."

She pushed back her shoulders and lifted her chin. The very picture of indignance. "The House would not stand for such a thing."

"The House knows which side it's bread is oiled on. What am I to them?" The last pearl button slipped into place in his waistcoat and he moved on to the next layer. "If the court wanted me, Prima Cicogna would hand me over to them wrapped up in a bow."

"Father would..."

He cut her off with a click as his feet slipped into his calfskin boots. "Shout and stomp and do nothing, as he always has."

"Let me come with you at least." She was trying not to let it, but the whine was creeping into her voice. Even at nineteen, his twin would always be the little sister begging for her place in his games.

“No matter your skill with the blade,” He was dressed at last, heading for the door and very deliberately leaving his sword belt where it hung on the wall behind her. “You could not fight the whole palace.”

“With our talents, together, we could break free if it is a trap.”

“And live for a week as outlaws before they caught us, plucking fruit from trees at the side of the road while our lands are razed and hot irons put to mother? I think not.”

She followed him into the hallway, yelled and darted back in to retrieve the strap of lace she wore over her eyes when visiting here.

Her brother had been bequeathed an ancient gift of their bloodline, just as their father had. Her inheritance had been less arcane. A stocky build. Auburn hair. Ruddy apple cheeks. Just like his. Yet he could walk these fabled halls with his eyes wide open and she could not.

Each corner and doorway was carved with lines to help visitors and servants guide themselves around. Most of the time, Harmony did not rely on them. It had been more than a year since she took up residence in the guest chambers, so long as nothing was left lying in the halls she could stride about as surely as she did on any cobbled street in Covotana. In her haste, she traced her fingers over them now. Leapfrogging from one to the next as her dress ruffled around her with each hasty step. “Artemio.”

She was certain he’d come this way, but now it was as though he had vanished entirely. She tried again. “Artemio?”

When his hand pressed over her mouth, she almost bit down on him. The bastard. He leaned in close to her ear. “Dear sister, there is nothing you can say or do that will change my mind, if they decide to execute me, I shall come and haunt you immediately so that you are the first to know. Could you ask for more?”

She licked his hand and he jerked it away in disgust. She could always reduce him to a child again. If only his appearance reflected that youthful energy. A streak of grey already ran through his hair and in those moments when she wished to torment him of an evening, she would count the new wrinkles that his tuition had provided him in the last week.

“If you die without me there to protect you, I’ll kill you.” Her slap missed him entirely, which was fortunate, since it had been at face height and he didn’t fancy explaining to royalty why he had a palm print on his cheek.

“While the planning is lacklustre, I certainly appreciate the sentiment.” Artemio chuckled. “Now may I go and see the Kings, or do you have further tantrums you wish to throw.”

She zeroed in on his voice and managed a half-hearted shove. “Go on, go, see if I care what they do with you.”

He wiped her spittle from his palm onto her tresses then jogged out of reach. “I love you too, Harm.”

For all of its prominence in the annals of Espher’s history, the House of Seven Shadows was far from central within Covotana itself. The city had grown within an ancient caldera, raised up from the surrounding fertile farmlands but constructed within the gentle curve of that bowl. The House of Seven Shadows stood near to the caldera’s rim while the palace lay in the centre.

Dearly beloved at arm's length.

It was a testament to the fear and respect that the people of Espher held in their hearts for the institution that in a place so desperate for every inch real-estate that it had begun to build up into the sky and dig down into the volcanic tunnels below, there was a small park grown up around the House, like it was a country villa.

The downside of which was that there was not a coach to be had without hiking out to the terracotta streets beyond the hedges. Artemio grumbled every step of the way, but it was more out of habit than any actual discomfort. The other scions of noble houses complained, so he complained along with them, wondering all the while how many were only complaining because the others did too. If any one of them was actually put out by a gentle walk through a park before flagging down a coach.

The driver was a mongrel, pigeon feathers where he should have had hair, face stretching to a beaked point, all clumsily hidden under a hood. If Artemio had any sort of reputation to protect then he wouldn't have dared to be seen driven by such a thing, but luckily his family's name was lower than dirt so he didn't need to delay.

Artemio had spent little time in the capitol throughout his youth. The Volpe presence at social events tended to be limited to quiet meals in dark rooms with many toasts of loyalty to the true king. With entirely too much emphasis given to the word true.

Covotana itself eluded his recollection. His memories of the city itself were much like this coach-ride. Glimpses of tall white stucco buildings beyond the drapery. Distant sightings of landmarks that his reading of the histories had ingrained in his mind as almost mythical.

The palace lay at the deep centre of the city, set back from the crowding buildings in a grand pool of shimmering blue-green water. Limited by its position as an island, it had no option but to grow upwards rather than out. It stretched now into the pale morning sky, tall enough for towers to be seen from out in the fields beyond the city walls. Artemio had come here on his arrival to Covotana as a student to bend his knee and swear his fealty as any noble son must. It was the last time that he was invited.

Theoretically, he should have been in attendance at every function in the palace and every day in court now that he was living in the city, but that rule seemed to have lapsed in his case. The invitations never came, and when all the other students were pouring out into the streets in their finery, he was left to enjoy another day of solitary study, or endure another evening of his sister's heckling card games.

After crossing the bridge over the shimmering water. A servant stood waiting for his arrival in the blue livery of the palace. One of many lingering by the palace steps for guests far more esteemed than he. Still, Artemio couldn't help but feel a sting when he was led not to the entrance of the palace, but rather around the side of a tower to where a servant's entrance lay ajar for him. His father would have thrown a fit at the slight, but he was proud to say that he was not his father. Practicality was one of the few virtues fate had granted him, and he was intent on clinging to it for all that he was worth.

The palace the nobles walked was smooth marble and pale statuary, the servants passages had more practical flagstones. The simple beauty of the white stone that Covotana had been carved from was on display, unobscured by tapestries and paintings. Up the spiral staircases, Artemio counted the turns as

they went, habitually. If he had to escape the palace as Harmony feared it would help to know the way out.

Finally they came out into a solarium, the top of some tower or other. If they'd meant to make him break a sweat, the Kings had forgotten how far south the Volpe Estates were, and how mountainous the region. This was a brisk morning stroll for a country lordling.

It was a rare thing to see both Kings in one place at a time. The entire purpose of the confusion surrounding which of the identical brothers had been crowned was to render assassination attempts pointless, yet here they were, sitting side by side in identical gilt robes with identical expressions of identical dull boredom, eating their breakfast from the same table.

There were no servants here, no attendants or guards. It was, confusing to say the least. One of them glanced his way and he startled into a stiff bow, "Master Volpe, come and eat with us."

One did not refuse a king, and if he was about to die, then Artemio could see no reason to do so with an empty stomach. He slumped down in the crassly gilded chair across from the shining kings and helped himself to some bread, cured ham and olives. He bit into one and felt it pop. Fresh as a spring breeze.

If the kings were troubled by his manners, they made no sign of it. Their indifference was immaculately presented, just like every other part of them. Their hair was rich and dark, oiled back from their faces so that every aquiline detail could be seen. Their countenances pale with powder. Madrigal and Canticle Cerva were barely a decade into their reign and to Artemio's mind, they were doing all that they could to remain a footnote curiosity in the histories still to be written. He did not blame them, Kings that lived interesting lives rarely did so for very long.

When he bit into the bread and found it dry, he leaned over to dip into the kings' shallow bowl of oil before he realised the social suicide that such an act involved. It was too late now, he was committed. He sat back and ate. The oil was good too. Fruity.

Neither king so much as raised an eyebrow. They were very well schooled. "We have long desired your attendance in court, Master Volpe. The Prima speaks highly of your talents."

Lies compounded with lies. If they'd desired his presence he would have been invited, if the Prima was fool enough to mention his existence then it would have been to disparage or make unfavourable comparisons. Whatever her talents in their shared occupation or her actual opinions on his talents, the Prima was an esteemed diplomat.

Still, one did not call a king a liar. "It is a pleasure to be here of course, but I must warn you, if you keep feeding me like this, I may never leave."

That drew out a titter that was rapidly quashed by a glance from the other brother. "We are pleased that you enjoy the fruits of our larders. When matters are more settled, perhaps you could dine with us more...frequently."

An offer like that would have been enough to make most courtiers piss themselves in unbridled delight, but Artemio remained, in his heart of hearts, a pessimist. "Which matters might you mean, your Majesty?"

“Right to the crux of things, Master Volpe?” It was the other king speaking now, though the voice was exactly the same. Cadence, tone and pitch. That must have been difficult to learn. “I must say your rude manner is...refreshing. Life in the court can be a tapestry of intrigues. It is pleasant to have someone speak so...directly.”

“I imagine that it must be hard to sit down on even the largest seat in the land with everyone jostling to lick at your backside.” The words were out before Artemio even realised it, and then there was no way to snatch them back. Mother had always warned him his tongue would get him killed. He’d never believed her.

For a moment both kings stared at him in stunned silence, then their composure broke. One of them flushed bright red beneath his powder. The other began shaking with restrained laughter. Spittle flying from his lips.

When they stopped, he was probably going to die. So he took the time to help himself to another handful of olives.

The red faced one continued to shudder, but the one who laughed found his words, “Oh Master Volpe, you turn virtue to sin. Would that circumstances were different and you might be a presence in court. I wager you’d...shake us free of our webs.”

At least one of the twins didn’t want him dead then, hopefully the one that had the deciding vote. “I am glad that I’m amusing, if nothing else.”

The king leaned forward to rest an elbow on the table. “Our hope is that you’ll be more than...amusing, Master Volpe. We have a task for you. One suited to your...unique talents. A task that might allow us to restore your proper standing in court, and the Teatro, if it were to be accomplished.”

It would have to be an impossible chore to overturn the grievous sin of his birth. Some diplomatic post so onerous that it would leave him dead or a worthless husk. Nothing less would be sufficient. Of course, declining a king’s polite request would leave him in much the same sorry state. “Whatever you desire of me, I am yours to command. How may I be of service?”

The kings both interrupted their hilarity with a synchronised smile. That was downright unsettling. “You will doubtless have heard some rumours of the recent...troubles that are befalling Espher?”

Artemio settled back in his seat. “Nothing.”

“You are trying to tell us that you know nothing of what has been happening?” The red faced one, rapidly fading back to white, raised an eyebrow. “Nothing of the...rumours?”

“I regret to tell you that I study and I sleep. On the rare occasion when I’m feeling particularly raucous, I play a game of cards with my sister, who lives just as lively a social life. To hear rumours, somebody would need to speak to me.”

This time there was no laughter, just a sigh. “What we tell you in this room...it is for your ears alone.”

“Of course, your majesty. As I said, I have nobody to tell, even if I had the foolishness to betray your trust.” He’d tell Harmony of course, his life would be intolerable until he did, but they didn’t need to know that.

Both kings leaned back in their seats. "There has been a series of...deaths. Esteemed members of our court are dying. At first the incidents were isolated, now they have become a pattern. Fourteen of the highest born in the land...gone before their time."

"I suppose that we do not have the good fortune of witnesses?" Despite himself, Artemio could feel himself getting caught up. For all of his natural restraint, he had a penchant for puzzles.

"Not a one. Neither the families nor our own agents have been able to explain how these assassins gained entry to the...locked chambers where these killings took place."

"Your agents?" Artemio wasn't the first to be hauled into some dark corner of the palace and given this impossible task. "Might I ask why you are replacing those agents with someone as...untried as myself?"

"Noble scions of the grand Familia of Espher. Chosen for their fitness...sharp minds to a man."

The other king chimed in, "The latest victims of the conspiracy."

There was the painful end of the arrangement, showing up at last. He was being offered up like a sacrificial lamb to whichever murderers were slaughtering their way through the nobility of Espher this week. His heritage made him more than expendable, either he solved the problem or died, it was win-win for the Cerva Kings.

Artemio licked the last of the oil from his lips then nodded. "I shall need the full compliance of the noble houses that I visit. No doors slammed in my face because of my name."

"Of course," The King gave him an indulgent smile. "You shall have our...writ to serve as your seal and ambassador."

Artemio braced himself. "I'll need honesty from you too."

That brought both of their smug smiles to a frosty halt. "Beg pardon?"

"I'll need to know the truth if I'm to make sense of this." Artemio set his elbows on the table and met the king's glowering, head on. "I have no care what version of the tale is told in rumours and history when the task is completed, but to succeed, I shall need an honest accounting. Not the prim and pretty version you've doled out to your dead helpers."

Tight lipped the closer king replied. "The castellan has all of the information that your...predecessors have gathered."

"Carefully trimmed and annotated." Artemio snapped back. It was like he was trying to get himself killed.

With a great show of rolling his eyes, the King who had laughed leaned back in his seat. "What secret is it that you believe we are...keeping from you?"

The other was less indulgent. "And what...rank arrogance makes you think that you can make demands of your sovereign?"

Artemio had no good answer for the second question, so he focused on the first. "I ask you only this, your Majesty. Who benefits from these deaths?"

“Who benefits when the greatest lords of Espher falter and the bold flinch at their own shadows? Nobody benefits...It is an affront to all people.”

All people of Espher at least. The Agrantine Empire would love to see their northern neighbour weakened and there were countless a dozen neighbouring kingdoms that would delight in her noble houses falling into disarray. Even if individual houses were not weakened, the handover of leadership from one generation to the next was always a time of turmoil. Not to mention the complex and myriad grudges, feuds and factions at work among the nobility of Espher even at the best of times.

Once upon a time, Artemio had been visiting the farmlands around Villa Volpe when a plough stuck on a rock in the field. Oxen and men united to free it, not Father of course, but all the lesser men. In the end the stone was overturned and a whole nest of vipers had sprung loose from beneath, setting every farmer and bull running for their lives. This was what he was being asked to willingly step into. He would not do so blindfolded. “In that case, my last question is this; why have you decided to entrust me with this task?”

Both kings eyes narrowed. “Is this your admission of being...unworthy of such trust?”

“You clearly recognise that I am as loyal as any man in your court or I would not be here at all. But I could not help but notice that you have no guards in here. And given that my invitation was delivered there, you know well that I study at the House of Seven Shadows.” It was bright in the solarium, with cunning mirrors driving sunlight down onto them from all angles. Even so, he was certain that he could see the kings eyes drift toward the shadows that he cast. “If you truly have no clue as to who your mystery assassin is, how could you have known that you did not just invite him to breakfast with you?”

The kings glanced at one another, then the more antagonistic of the pair seemed to deflate a little. “We regret to be the bearers of such news, but it seems that your father has not thought to write to you in his grief...the latest victim of this plague of assassins, almost a week ago, was Contessa Loretta Volpe.”

He was beyond suspicion because his own mother had been a victim. That made perfect sense. Yet for some reason, Artemio’s mind could not leap forward to the next logical step in the puzzle. He sat in silence, his carefully schooled expression betraying nothing, the wheels of his mind spinning without progress. Mother was dead.

It was no surprise to him that Father had not troubled to write to him informing him of this fact. That neglect was the one constant that Artemio clung to as his heart froze to ice within him. Father’s indifference to his children could always be relied on.

Artemio was going to have to share this news with Harmony. He was going to have to take her aside in some private room and tell her that mother died a week ago. Assassinated. He would have to watch her face crumple and her sorrow overtake her. She would weep and sob while he was powerless to take any part of her pain away. Somehow she would find a way to blame herself. It would be her fault for coming away to the city. It would be her fault that she was not there, in the locked chamber where her mother had expired.

The indignance that Artemio always had to spare flared to life, cutting through the numb silence. His mother was dead for no good reason but some political game. He drew in a deep breath. “Thank you for

taking time out of your busy day to inform me of this, your majesty. I shall collect the information from your castellan and begin my inquest immediately.”

“Our thanks to you...Master Volpe.”

Artemio rose, and was already striding towards the door with purpose when the other king called out behind him, “Happy hunting.”

Artemio bit down on his retort and left.