

Within the Cocoon
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112

Harmony looked the peasant girl stuffed into a fancy dress up and down with dismay written all over her face. "What am I meant to do with that?"

"*That* is going to slap the teeth out your head if you call her *that* again."

The Prima held up a hand to stop the ensuing sniping. "Harmony, it has come to my attention that you are lacking in activities to pursue due to your unique social situation."

Through gritted teeth she answered, "Yes, Prima."

"As such, my dear girl, it occurred to me that you might be the perfect person to undertake a certain task for me. One that I would consider a personal favour."

Harmony wet her lips. Being owed a personal favour from the Prima was not something to be sniffed at. "How can I be of assistance, Prima?"

"This charming young woman is Orsina Aceta, a scion of a small house from the northern reach who has exhibited some talent in the arts which we study here." The girl gave Harmony a sullen stare. Belying all the sweet lies that the Prima was spinning about her. "Despite her good breeding and natural charm, I am afraid that country living has left her somewhat bereft of the education in elocution and manners that most families would bestow upon their young. My desire is for you to remedy this situation with all haste. Make her as... acceptable as is possible in your time together."

Harmony's mouth fell open. "You expect me to believe that she is the daughter of some country noble?"

The Prima gave her a tight lipped smile. "I expect that after your careful tutelage, everyone else will believe it. Yes, my dear girl."

Harmony opened and closed her mouth a few times as her brain tried to work through the problem she was presented with. "And if I refuse?"

The Prima pouted. "Well then we shall both be very disappointed."

Orsina spoke from behind her in a bitter monotone. "Yes. Please. Teach me how to be just like you."

Harmony sniggered, despite herself. There was no way that she was going to turn the Prima down. So she might as well find her amusement somewhere. "Alright, I'll do what I can with her, but if she still acts like she was born in a pigsty by the end of it, it isn't my fault. Some things can't be fixed."

Orsina restrained herself from leaping at Harmony without any intervention from the Prima this time around, but it was clear from the narrowing of her eyes that she was just waiting for her opportunity to get the other girl alone.

"Then I shall leave the two of you to devise a curriculum of studies. I'm afraid that young Orsina shall be attending classes throughout most of the day soon enough, but come evening she will be all yours, in perpetuity."

The Prima was already heading for the door of the suite when Harmony called after her. "Does she know how to play cards, at least?"

Orsina's voice was just a little above a growl. "Ask her for yourself?"

The Prima smiled at the two of them as she eased out of the room, as if the two of them were going to be fast friends, rather than pulling each other's hair out within a few minutes.

Blowing out a breath, Harmony turned to Orsina. "Well, can you?"

"No."

Harmony clapped her hands together. "Great, I'll finally have someone I can beat."

In the ensuing hour, she beat Orsina soundly. Round after round. Until it seemed like Orsina simply couldn't grasp the game at all. Eventually she tossed her cards down and grumbled. "You're cheating."

Harmony laughed out loud. "Just because you don't understand the game doesn't mean I'm cheating."

"Every time, you've got good cards. Every time." She kicked the leg of the table as she tried to cross her legs in the voluminous skirts. "How am I meant to win if I've got bad cards and you've got good ones?"

Harmony was genuinely confused. "I... don't always have good cards?"

"But you bid in every time." Orsina jerked her chin at the heap of polished pebbles between them.

"Yes." Harmony spoke slowly, like she was dealing with a child or imbecile. "Because that is the nature of the game."

Orsina threw up her hands. "But why would you bid if you've got bad cards?"

The confusion suddenly made sense to Harmony and she had to restrain herself from laughing. "Because you don't need good cards to win. You just need the other person to fold."

For a moment Orsina sat gobsmacked, before she finally whimpered out. "You're lying?"

"That is the challenge of the game." Harmony let a little of her amusement slip into her speech now, making it sound like she was just delighted that Orsina had worked it out. "You are not playing against the draw of the cards. You are playing against the other players."

Orsina blinked hard. "I didn't know you were meant to lie."

Harmony scooped up the stack of cards and shuffled them once more. "Another round?"

Orsina's brows had drawn down. "Is it all lies?"

"Whatever do you mean?"

"Everything you're meant to be teaching me. It is all just lying isn't it?" She glared up at Harmony with genuine anger on her face. The sort of thing that a noble born girl would never let anyone see. "Not just the big lie, that I'm some noble, but all the rest of it. All the way down. Even just talking like this is all... lies."

“Politeness requires some omission, certainly.” This was unfamiliar philosophical territory for Harmony, like asking a fish to describe water. “If a friend does not look good in her dress, I would not inform her of that until she was in a position to change it.”

“Not just that, all of it. There’s no honesty in anything. The Prima doesn’t believe in most of the things she’s saying. She just says them because she’s meant to, or because it might make other people do what she wants.”

“We do not accuse our betters of telling us things that are not true.” Harmony repeated her mother’s words verbatim without even realising it. “It isn’t polite.”

“You all even lie about lying.”

Harmony’s ire was finally up enough that she raised her voice. “Well excuse me for spending my whole afternoon trying to help you deceive the entirety of the courts of Espher.”

Orsina took a deep breath, then said, “Sorry.”

Harmony deflated a little. She hadn’t even attempted to understand the other woman’s perspective up until now. She hadn’t even considered how lost and confused she would feel if she were suddenly dumped in some peasant village and told that she had to blend in or risk exile or worse. “Do not concern yourself with it. I understand that this is a learning experience for you. I know that it may not seem like it from the way we were forced together, but I do genuinely want to help you.”

“Oh wow, lying really does work with you lot. I fake one sorry and suddenly we’re best friends.”

This time, when Harmony laughed, it was not the polite snigger she’d allowed herself in front of the Prima, it was the genuine wild hoot that she made when it was just her and Artemio. It was enough to shock Orsina out of her dark mood and into a genuine, if tentative smile.

“Well, now that we’re best friends, you’re going to have to let me do your hair.” Harmony had been desperately hunting for something to compliment the girl on since she’d accepted her new terrible duty, “The Prima is a genius in academia, but she has the fashion sense of fossil, and to make matters worse, she has no idea what she’s doing with a headful of curls like that. I swear, I’d kill a man for them.”

Orsina smirked. “They’d probably kill him for you. They’ve killed enough combs before to have a taste for it.”

The hooting laugh of friendship sounded again.

By the time that Artemio burst in, still half-cut on the morning’s wine and rambling about murders, Orsina’s hair had been up and down more times than a ladder and Harmony had discovered to her disgust, that she had been so lonely for the past month that even a peasant with delusions of grandeur was good company.

Both women froze in place as Artemio strode by, but he didn’t seem to notice them. “Weeks that I have been hunting for any clue, any lead that might bring me closer to my quarry. This very morning I grew so desperate as to enlist the aid of the Ambassador of Agrant in my task, though in truth I was rather hoping that she might attack me and give me at least some direction...” He paced back and forth in front

of them. "Then just when I was beginning to think that the only solution would be to use myself as bait and tease the villains out of the shadows I turn around and..."

He froze when he noticed Orsina for the first time. His open mouth snapped shut. Harmony started to shake and giggle from where she was sitting behind her, hands still tangled in the other woman's hair. "Orsina Aceta, this is my idiot brother, Artemio. Idiot brother, this is Orsina."

He bowed stiffly. "A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

"Orsina, I believe that my brother needs a moment of my time. Would you be so kind as to find a servant and ask them to send up supper for three?"

"Just for two, if you please. I cannot stay."

"And why might that be, Art? What is..."

Orsina slipped out of the room as swiftly and silently as she could. Her hair still half up and half down in a manner that any true noblewoman of Espher would have considered scandalous. She had scarcely made it two steps before a hand seized her dress from behind.

Old instincts flared. She slapped the grasping hand away and had a fist up before she realised it was Artemio. He glanced from her fist to the strip of cloth dangling from his hand. "Your blindfold."

It must have been so obvious to him that she didn't belong. But still she managed to mumble out, "I don't need one."

"You're a student?" The puzzlement was plastered all over his face. She could not fool even this one man for one minute, how was she meant to pass among the rest of the nobles. Behind Artemio, Harmony went from looking surprised to meeting Orsina's eyes and tilting up her head so she could look down her nose at everything.

Whatever else she might have been, Orsina was a quick study. She raised her chin and with all the confidence she did not feel she replied. "No, I'm just some peasant who has wandered into the House of Seven Shadows off the streets."

Harmony's face went from shocked at that admission to delighted in an instant as Artemio recoiled. "Right..." He stepped backwards into the room with all haste. Repeating, "Pleasure to meet you," as he shut the door in her face.

There were bells spaced between the suites of the many non-student residents of the House, that could be used to summon a servant at will, but the idea of summoning someone to serve her sat almost as ill with Orsina as the idea of demanding that somebody else make her supper for her. True enough, Mother Vinegar had fed her more often than not, but that had been an arrangement made of simplicity. The old woman stayed near the hearth for her comfort while setting Orsina her tasks, and in the dark of night when nobody was around, Orsina might admit that the arrangement between them had been something like a family. This was different.

She wandered the halls, as lost now as she'd been when she first arrived in the house. She had a vague idea that she might find the kitchens herself and make something quick, but even as she walked she realised how ridiculous it was. She meandered back along the same identical corridors in search of a bell

or a servant, whichever came first. As it turned out, what came first was a gaggle of other students. They were walking along, chattering among themselves quite happily until Orsina came into sight.

It felt like she was on the road again with a column of cavaliers bearing down on her. If she could have flung herself over the bannister to escape them as they'd done with so many ditches, then she very well might have. Instead she lifted her chin, let her wild hair fall back behind her and strode on.

Lying was a virtue among these people. So too, Orsina had realised all too swiftly, was rudeness. The more contempt she treated these nobles with, the more they'd scramble for her approval. It explained so much about the way that the world was run that this was how the people in charge of things thought.

They looked after her as she passed and the whispering took up almost immediately, but they were not doubting her right to be there. They were not questioning her lineage or demanding she be sent away. They were jealous of her poise, of her outrageous hairstyle, even of the air of mystery that enveloped her as a new student. Glances were cast back at her, but Orsina very deliberately did not turn from her course.

She could not look back, or all would be lost.

Dinner was a simple affair of antipasto by the fireside. Finer food that Orsina had ever tasted in her life, yet she found that it could not hold her attention. Not when Harmony was right there in front of her.

Neither of the women had ever had a friend their own age before, beyond Harmony's somewhat unhealthy attachment to her brother. Every time that Orsina had the other woman written off as just another snob, Harmony would let something slip, something that would have been atrociously rude in normal company, but was perfectly acceptable between the two of them. Likewise, every time that Harmony thought to herself that she couldn't believe she was doomed to spend her days educating some common boor, Orsina showed a little sparkle of wit that drew out an unwitting burst of laughter.

In all honesty, Orsina's ignorance was the part of her that Harmony found the most appealing. There were things that she just did not know. Things that Harmony had grown up living and breathing were alien to a peasant. Even the things that Harmony would have thought were patently obvious to anyone with eyes sometimes slipped into the other woman's blind spots.

Which was why, even though she should have expected it eventually, Harmony was taken aback when she was asked bluntly, "But why are you here?"

It stunned her so much, that she found herself answering before she'd even picked apart the question. "There weren't any marriage proposals, there wasn't a chance to make friends back home in the south. There was only me. From the moment we were old enough to understand that Art was gifted, I knew that this was my duty. My destiny."

Orsina's puzzled expression said more than words. Harmony groaned, "You're really going to make me say it?"

Apparently, Orsina didn't even understand the question that she was asking. Of course she didn't. She was a peasant. What would a peasant know about the court and crown. Harmony took a deep breath and settled back in her chair, pondering how to tell as little of the story as possible.

“My family are not beloved here in the capitol. It has been generations, but there are still those that call the Cerva usurpers, and say that our claim to the throne is the more... righteous. As such it is considered political suicide to be seen in our company. A marriage proposal, an offer of younger sons as cavaliers or courtiers, even a friendship might be interpreted as sedition. The truth is, that this is why the Prima chose me to educate you, because she knows I have nobody to tell about your little deception, even if it weren't in my own best interests to help you and earn her favour.”

Orsina gawked at her throughout all this without even moving to interrupt. Harmony had tears prickling at her eyes by the time that she was through. “I'm so sorry. But I still don't get it. Your brother is here to study, like me. But you can't... you aren't like me. So why are you here?”

Harmony's head fell into her hands and she let out a heaving laugh as she finally understood the question. “You aren't asking why I have been chosen as Artemio's impresario. You don't know what an impresario is.”

“A what?”

“You don't know anything at all do you?” There was an edge of mockery in her bitterness. Disbelief blending with disgust. “Not even about what you are?”

The tone put Orsina's hackles up. “I know things. Just not this stuff.”

“When you do your little shade thing, it makes you older. It drains your remaining days.”

“Yes, I know that.” Orsina grumbled and stretched her back, pushing against the bones of her corset. “I know that much all too well.”

Harmony ignored the odd interruption, filing it as more peasant strangeness. “An impresario is there to help lighten the load. We're bonded to you, so that you can drain our life instead of your own.” She lifted her wine from the table that sat between them, like a toast. “A second glass to drink from.”

“Wait, you're just giving up your life for your brother?” Orsina looked genuinely aggrieved at the prospect.

“I may as well share, I wasn't using it anyway,” Harmony quipped.

“But it's your life, and you're just going to let him use it up like oil in a lantern?” Orsina leaned closer, taking her empty hand between both of hers. Genuinely concerned. It was almost more than Harmony could take. This girl she barely knew, feeling for her so deeply. Feeling pangs of pain for her, not out of obligation or duty or some hope of repayment, but because she actually cared. “That isn't right. I know you've got your politics stuff going on to stop you finding a husband or whatever you wanted to do with yourself, but there is so much worth living for.”

She couldn't cope with the intensity of the moment. The rawness of conversation without artifice. She tried to wall herself off. “I can't say that I've noticed much.”

Orsina looked so stricken when she made that silly quip that Harmony immediately wished she could swallow the words back down. She did the next best thing. She repaid Orsina's empathy with her own sincerity. “Artemio is a good man. I know that he didn't make much of an impression when you met him, but he cares for me as deeply as any brother could. He wouldn't squander what I'm giving him. He

wouldn't waste it. I trust him with my life." She squeezed Orsina's hand and smirked. "Besides, somebody has to take care of the idiot. He clearly can't do it himself."

It was just enough to break the tension. Orsina settled back into her seat, nibbling at her cheese and bread like she was scared it might be taken away from her. "One thing at a time. One bite at a time, then put it back on your plate."

Orsina dropped her snack back onto the plate with a scoff. "Seriously?"

"A lady would not care to be compared to a squirrel." Harmony said, taking a delicate sip of her wine and setting the glass back down. "Nor for a reputation as a glutton to follow her."

"Reputation? That's why you lot have all the food you could ever eat and you're half-starved all the same?" She lifted her cheese back up and took a delicate bite before placing it back down and scowling. "What a waste. You could feed a family of ten with what we've got here, bit of barley or lentils to stretch out the dried meat into something more substantial..."

Harmony couldn't say why, or what shade of dreadful rudeness took over her, but she found herself blurting out, "Who are you really?"

"Orsina's my real name."

"Oh no doubt, but who are you? Whose bastard?" Orsina flinched at the word. "I'm sorry, I do not mean to wound you with my questions, but we're such fast friends already, and I've already spilled all of my family woes, and..."

"Nobody's. I'm nobody's bastard. I'm nobody's secret child. My parents were farmers. We lived in a little village with some other farmers. No lords. No kings. Nothing. I'm nobody."

It was Harmony's turn to feel affronted on behalf of her new friend. To have been lied to like that was terrible. "That cannot be."

"Even the name the Prima gave me is a joke." Orsina let out a little bitter laugh at that joke. "It's only because I studied under Mother Vinegar before she sent me here. Otherwise she'd probably have called me Orsina Selvaggia."

"Aceta Madre?" Harmony was struck by that odd detail. "Like in the children's story?"

"No, Aceta Madre," Orsina rolled her eyes. "The grumpy old crone that lives in the woods, complains non-stop and snores like a prize hog."

All of this was getting Harmony off track and she tried to circle the conversation back around. "So there was no local lord who like to come and visit with your mother? No... rumours?"

Orsina's temper frayed. "Why do all you nobles care so much about who somebody's parents are? Doesn't it matter who I am?"

It was another of the many questions of the day that challenged something fundamental enough in Harmony's world that she'd never given it much consideration. "I..."

"Are you lot obsessively trying to breed for glossier manes or something?"

The image was enough to make Harmony snort and honk all over again. Eventually settling herself enough to try and work out an answer. "Some part of it is history; knowing the person that you are speaking to, by knowing where they came from. Some politics; knowing that the son of a political ally is liable to carry on the banner when his father died."

Orsina was listening intently. For all of her irritation with the personal questions that admittedly would have made anyone enraged, it seemed that she genuinely wanted to hear Harmony's explanation of just about anything. "A great deal of the obsession is about the inheritance of title, land and property. Kingdoms have been forged or broken on the back of an unexpected inheritance. It is why marriage matters so much. It is a way of allying families in perpetuity. Then... there is the gift of binding. Like my 'shiny mane,' it is hereditary. So a noble family with many shade-binders might expect many more in coming generations, and a family with fewer might expect their power to wilt as the centuries roll on."

Orsina spoke softly. "Money and power."

"What else is there?" Harmony snapped back, not quite meaning it, but not quite not meaning it either.

Conversation lulled for a long moment as the gulf between them seemed to widen, the two worlds that they inhabited so different that it seemed almost impossible to bridge the gap. Harmony tried again to lighten the mood. "I'm sure you shall have plenty of both soon enough. If you're talented enough to have caught the Prima's eye despite your... circumstances, it shan't take long before the proposals start piling up."

Orsina seemed even more concerned about that. Everything that Harmony wanted quite desperately and was denied to her was Orsina's for the taking, yet it seemed as though she didn't even want it. "With marriage, you'll gain the protection of a family. You'll have their influence to aid you in your goals. It will be quite a step up for someone of such humble beginnings."

"So marriage is about... money and power?"

Once again Harmony caught herself quoting her own mother verbatim. "Love is for the poets."

"Maybe we should take up poetry instead of marriage, then." Orsina smiled. That same grin she'd given Harmony the first time she'd earned a laugh from her.

This time it brought a flush to Harmony's cheeks that she had to move past brusquely. She took another sip of wine and pretended to check on the fire. "I'm sure we'd make quite the pair of poets. The peasant and the hermit. Writing about the love we'll never know."

Orsina was sullen again when she turned back, so in a flash, Harmony reached for the things that brought her comfort. "Have you any lessons tomorrow?"

"Not yet. I think the Prima wants to check if your work has stuck before I'm allowed out in front of other people." Orsina's mood still seemed grim.

"Then tomorrow, I shall take you to my favourite place in the House of Seven Shadows." Harmony clapped with excitement. "The gymnasium."

Every crumb of new knowledge seemed to be enough to tease Orsina back out of her shell. Like she had a hunger to learn things that overpowered all other sense. "The what?"

“It is a space set aside for us to exercise our bodies, rather than our minds. A private place, mostly, where we can talk safely without worrying about anyone peeping at us or listening in.”

“Exercise? Like... work?” Orsina gawked at her again. “You lot do work for fun?”

Harmony laughed away the question, then said with a grin of her own. “Many times today you’ve looked like you wanted to hit me. Tomorrow I shall give you the chance.”