

**Holding Court**  
***Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cervi 112***

In the days that followed the attack within the House of Seven Shadows, attention began turning inexorably towards Orsina. Those who had seen her around the house since her arrival no longer recognised her. It was as though an entirely new person had appeared out of thin air to form the basis of all the gossip. A new student who had bested a graduated Shadebound in a duel. A duel within the house no less. It was the sort of thing that crystallised into local legend. The involvement of the disgraced Volpe sister was just another twist in the tale, and when mixed with the rumours that had sprung up about young Artemio Volpe being the secret lover of the deceased following the confrontation at the Spring Ball. It was a toxic soup of whispers.

At first Orsina was able to ignore it, staying close to Harmony, who had graduated from looking at her like she was chore, skipped many of the intermediate steps, and now treated her like there was nobody more beloved to her heart. But as the days rolled on and the Shades of the house were coaxed back into their usual containment more and more of the students came back. Nobles who had never been denied anything in their lives and now found the lack of access to this curious new creature in their midst to be a great frustration. Some hissed that she was a ward of the Volpe family, raised up from obscurity to be a bride to the family's heir. Others that she was the daughter of some exiled lordling come back to reclaim her family's domain from those who had usurped it in the generations since. Speculation dogged her steps, yet not a one of them ever considered the awful truth, that she was no-one of note and her friendship with Harmony mere happenstance.

While she still had her own chambers somewhere in the bowels of the building, Orsina found that most nights she ended up bedding down in one of the spare rooms of Harmony's suite, warm with wine and relaxed by the sounds of other living people being about her. The desolate silence of her own well insulated chamber had been too alien to a girl more accustomed to being trod on in the night. The silence stretching out and leaving vacuous openings for her thoughts and fears to dwell in.

Artemio was there with them now, more often than not, sat away from their chatter with a book and candle, frowning all night long and glancing up only when prompted to issue his opinion. He still did not seem to know of Orsina's origins, though it struck her as odd at first that Harmony had not told him, until she realised that she meant to use her brother as a measuring stick by which the properness of Orsina's behaviours might be judged.

Sometimes he would tut and correct some error in her habits or comportment, other times he would barely glance up before returning to his studies with a grumble. He could be cajoled to join them at the card table when the evening was drawing on, but only once both of the girls had expressed their desire that he join them. She had asked Harmony if this was some matter of politeness that had escaped her, and Harmony had given her a little knowing smirk in return. "I'm his sister, so he can do as he pleases in my company and feel no pang of guilt, but you... You're a lady. He doesn't want to force his company upon you if you do not desire it."

Orsina had actually barked with laughter at that idea.

Laughter had come to her lips again not long after, when the twins had returned from a foraging expedition to the kitchens and Artemio could not even look at her without a blush. By then, they were quite accustomed to Orsina's blunt manners. So neither was startled when she flatly asked, "What?"

Harmony had descended into titters at once, and Artemio's face rapidly approached the same shade of red as the velvet upholstery. He opened and closed his mouth several times before retreating back to his little table and his little book. Sinking down with a huff to intently ignore them both.

The armfuls of their dinner were spread across the sideboard with all haste, but Harmony paid them no mind, still giggling away to herself as she situated herself on the chaise beside Orsina, all the better to whisper to her without fear of Artemio being embarrassed, as he had been during Orsina's many enquiries about corsetry.

"The scullery maids were talking about the two of you." She said it with such mirth that Orsina genuinely wondered if there was something inherently funny about whatever a scullery maid was. Seeing her confusion, Harmony pressed on. "The latest rumour is that the fight was borne of jealousy between lovers."

This time, she managed to remember the manners that they had been so desperately drilling all day. She almost choked before she managed to strangle out. "I beg your pardon."

Tears were running down Harmony's face at the sight of Orsina so discomfited. "They think that you and Artemio are an item, and that Rosina was trying to eliminate the competition."

So sprang forth the new tides of laughter until Orsina was scarcely able to catch a breath. Wheezing out, "That's insane. Me and him?" just loud enough that it called another flush to Artemio's face. He hunched down lower behind his book and pretended not to notice them, even as his ears turned crimson.

The girls continued to giggle for a few moments more, but when she'd wiped the tears from her eyes, Orsina noticed an odd expression on Harmony's face. One that she couldn't quite identify. When she whispered this time, it was definitely not with the intent for him to overhear them. "Would it be so terrible?"

Orsina looked at her sideways, then glanced over to where Artemio was still furiously scribbling away at his notes. His quest for the kings, along with a few of the more salacious gruesome details, had been shared with her, so at least she could understand why he was so devoted to the work that he had undertaken. There was a very good reason for him to sink his every waking hour into scouring the intelligence that his predecessors and their little spies had gathered when the alternatives were death or elevation to the courts once more. "Is he so desperate for attention that you'd toss a commoner in his bed?"

Harmony rolled her eyes, then leaned in closer. "Listen to me Orsina, I've been thinking about this ever since all of that business the other day. You know how I care for you, bastard or commoner or whatever you may be. I don't want to be parted from you. This would be a way to ensure that we can stay together in the future. If you were to marry Art then our lives would be intertwined in perpetuity."

Orsina glanced up at him again, and she could see Artemio noticing the attention. His brows drew down and he cleared his throat, pretending to be absorbed in the work.

“Did he put you up to this?”

“Art? No! He’s too bashful by far. It wouldn’t have even occurred to him. Planning weddings and alliances never seems to occur to men. They need calmer heads to guide them. But I want you to think about it. Seriously consider it, please. Once he’s caught whoever is behind the troubles, our family will be back in the good graces of the court, all of our old allies will come back out of the woodwork like the lice they are and I’m doubtful that anyone could make a more promising match for you.”

She did not say “Given you are a common lout,” but Orsina still heard the implication.

“If his future is so bright, why do you think that he would marry me? Surely he’ll have his pick of all the rich and famous families’ eligible maids.” Orsina was still looking at him, actually considering it for the first time. He’d never treated her with anything beyond cold politeness up until this point, but there was no denying that the solution had appeal. She wouldn’t have to spend her whole life keeping her humble origins a secret from the man she was wed to, or his family. Harmony would be there with her to help cover for any little mistakes that she made, and to run interference with anyone who questioned her too deeply. And he did strike quite a handsome profile, even if it was contorted into a frown of concentration.

“Well... perhaps other girls might be tripping over their skirts to get to him, but they don’t matter. I don’t like any of them. I like you.” She took a hold of Orsina’s hand and gave it a squeeze. The one that still ran a little cold after all the lost blood. She leaned in conspiratorially. “Besides, you have leverage at the moment. After the showing you put on the other day you could ask Art to lop of his own leg and he’d ask which one you’d prefer gone.”

“So marrying me would be like dismembering himself?” Orsina drew her hand back. She already knew that she was not beautiful the way that Harmony and the other women in the school were beautiful. Her long months of travel and her rapid aging had seen to it that she could develop none of the gentle curves that were in vogue around Covotana, and while she ate as much as she could stomach at each meal, she still could not seem to acquire the pleasing softness in her features that the women all seemed to be seeking. Like her body was still running at a deficit since her rapid growth.

She was coltish and uncomfortable in her freshly grown body, unaccustomed to the shape of it and uncomfortable with everything she saw when changing from one borrowed dress to the next. She had not gathered the courage to look at her reflection in the dressing room mirror before she was garbed. She feared that the stranger looking back might have started sobbing. It was not that she cared whether some man might find her desirable. Rather that she feared she would never come to know or like her body again. It made her perpetually unsure of herself, and Harmony’s words were like a twist of the knife.

“No. No, my darling. That is not what I meant. Only that if you wanted him, there is no way that he could refuse you.” She snatched up Orsina’s hand again, the smile on her face tinged with something all too much like pity for Orsina’s liking. “Honestly, I think that the two of you would be a fine match for each other, even if it weren’t for your circumstances. Just think of the quality of the babies the two of you could bump out. With you both being so powerful, they’d probably be born fully fledged Shadebound! Knowing the Prima, it was probably in the back of her mind when she foisted you on me. She always had an eye for such pairings.”

Orsina paled at the mention of babies. Until that moment her consideration of marriage had extended as far as living under the same roof and eating dinner together. She was uncomfortably aware of the physical expressions of affection that were required for babies. Mother Vinegar had been the village midwife after all, and all the parts and their intersection had been clearly explained to her in the same matter of fact manner as the properties of herbs.

She looked at Artemio again, and this time it was her who flushed with embarrassment. "I'll think about it."

Harmony switched subjects rapidly to ensure that she did not embarrass anyone further, but there was a knowing smirk on her face sometimes when she thought that Orsina wasn't looking. Like she had uncovered some girlish crush instead of being the one who had proposed... what she'd proposed. They ate dinner using more cutlery than Orsina had ever encountered before in her life, with brief pauses to ensure that she was using them correctly and even Artemio could find no fault in her, though he seemed to be looking for it quite intently.

The flush burned back up Orsina's cheeks as she cursed herself for not asking Harmony whether she had run her plans for their marriage by Artemio before approaching her with them. Did he know? Was every glance that he sent her way a flirtation or was he pondering the kind of wife that she might make him?

Regardless, it seemed that he found something to be satisfied with each time that he looked her way, and while there was no praise forthcoming, neither did she have to endure any of the usual corrections. When they were done and settled around the fireplace with the last of the wine, Artemio finally deigned to pass comment. "You seem much improved in your comportment since when we first met. Quite acceptable for court, I should say."

It was enough to bring an uncharacteristic stillness to Harmony, but Orsina didn't notice. She was so delighted at the praise that she giggled, "And why would anyone want to go to court?"

He sipped his wine casually, but spoke with care. "To swear fealty to the king as they should have when they first arrived in the city?"

Orsina's mouth opened and shut a few times, but it was Harmony who surged in to her rescue. "Surely they can't be angry about her failure to visit. You know her circumstances were hardly ideal, if she'd come straight to court to present herself I dread to think the response she would have received."

"I do not believe that the Cerva are feeling vindictive about the matter, and I suspect that the Prima has already laid some of the groundwork within the court to ensure our dear Orsina is not treated too harshly for her failure to attend them." He set his glass down on the table between them with a clunk. "But her presence will be required. Her name has reached too many ears, She has made a spectacle of herself in defending you, dear sister. If she is known of in court, then she must present herself in court."

Orsina gathered enough of her wits to croak out, "I'm not ready. All those people looking at me? Judging me? I can't possibly do it."

Harmony rested a hand on her shoulder, and glancing to her brother for encouragement, she said, "You could though. I mean, we have covered all of the basics, and while you're the belle of the ball here at the House, in court I doubt that you would garner a second look. So long as you kept your head down,

gave them a curtsy and got out of there when they took their leave, I believe that you'd be quite alright."

Orsina looked as troubled as she had in the same spot a few days hence with blood on her hands both figurative and literal. "They'll take one look at me, and they'll know, and then..."

"There is nothing to know." Artemio cut her off before she could wallow in her own panic for a moment longer. "You are a young lady recently arrived to the city with the intent to study at the House of Seven Shadows and it took some time for you to settle in before you felt yourself presentable enough to approach the king. They need hear no more of your tale than those truths."

She wet her lips. "You truly think that I could..."

Both Volpe twins were nodding at her encouragingly. Artemio even leaned forward to pat her on the knee awkwardly. "I have business at court tomorrow, I might even serve as your escort some portion of the way."

She would rather have had Harmony, but beggars could not be choosers. She patted his hand before it could be withdrawn, and he had a bashful smile on his face when she glanced up.

Sleep had been hard to come by that night. Too many thoughts seemed to compete for Orsina's attention, and each time that she closed her eyes she felt them parading back and forth across the darkened stage of her mind. Marriage. The court. The king. Her curtsy, still clumsy. Artemio had said she curtsied like a milkmaid the first time he saw it and she'd almost burst out laughing at how close to the truth he'd cut. Not a milkmaid, a damp-footed farmer. A girl more at home barefoot in the woods than creaking over polished floorboards, who was going to try and pass herself off to the king himself as one of his noble court.

The evening's elaborate dinner twisted in her gut. The soothing warmth of the wine turning acrid and prickling back up her throat. There was no way that she could go through with this.

Every seam in the wood of the ceiling was committed to her memory. Every moment of the past days replayed itself endlessly. Her wounds were on their way to healing thanks to some herbs that the servants had fetched at her request, but there was an ache that went deeper than any one of them. She wanted to go home.

Play acting at being something she wasn't ate at her spirit in a way that the shades never had, and more and more often now, she found the line between truth and lie blurring. She was polite and kind to the men and women that fetched and carried whatever Harmony wanted, but more and more often now, she could not see herself as one of them. Whatever twist of fate had damned her to a lifetime living in the woods with Mother Vinegar had set her apart from everyone else and made her a pariah among the common folk, but she had never before considered that it might set her above them, not just apart. When she was kind to the servants now, it was in the same way that Harmony was kind to them, not the kinship of equals but the respect of an owner for a well-trained dog.

She had to get out. It wasn't just panic at the prospect of being caught out as a peasant in the highest court in the land, she was losing herself. Piece by piece the mask was becoming her face, and if she did not cast it aside now, she had no clue where this path would end.

There was no lock upon the bedroom door, the key was in Harmony's chamber door, there were no guards within the House or at the gates. She could walk right out if she so chose. Even after the attack by Rosina, there had been no consideration of locking the doors, the loss of face would be too much for the institution to endure. It was strange to think of a building having a sense of pride that could be punctured, but with it packed so densely with shades, it made a terrible sense. Every one of them was house proud and riled up by the latest slight. Orsina didn't fancy any assassin's chances of making it in unscathed. Open doors or not.

Pangs of guilt struck her as she wrestled into a dress that was not hers, but had been becoming hers day by day. It was not as though she had asked for the charity, nor intended to abuse it when such gifts were received. Now she thought that she might be able to sell the dress of her back for enough to get a carriage out of the city. She couldn't go back to Mother Vinegar, they would look for her on the northbound roads, but there was a whole wild world into which she might flee and make a life for herself as she was. Perhaps she would never master her gifts, perhaps her days would be sapped from her by each shade she encountered, but at least they would still be her days to lose. Her life to spend. Not this false Orsina devoured by the masquerade.

She tread softly on the boards beyond her door. The only one who might try to halt her flight was Harmony. She would miss Harmony when she was gone, but there was nothing to be done about it. There would be other friends for her somewhere.

The fire still burned in the main room of the suite, but Orsina thought nothing of it until she stepped out and saw Artemio waiting for her. "Good evening to you Miss Orsina."

Brought up short, it took her a moment to force words out. "I was just..."

He waved her lie away before it could even be made. "You need make no explanations to me. Nor need you worry that I shall rouse Harmony to intercede with you. To my mind at least, you have more than earned whatever freedom you desire."

Her shoulders slumped. "Thanks."

Artemio nodded to a pouch laying on the table beside his books. "There is money for you, if you need it. Not much, I'm afraid, I do not have much in the way of ready money, but it ought to be enough to keep you in some small comfort until you reach whatever destination you have set in your mind."

"You didn't need to..." She backed away from the table, though the fat pouch would certainly make her flight much easier.

"I am aware." He cut her off before she could even begin, yet again. "This is not a gift of obligation, but if our paths are to part, I would rest easier knowing that you were not headed straight into strife."

"Why are... I..." She was at a loss for words. "Thanks again."

Leaning back in his chair, he shrugged a shoulder. "The debt that I owe you can never be repaid."

Inching forwards, eyes on the pouch, still half-sure that this was some sort of trap, Orsina barely heard herself say. "I didn't do it for you."

“Intentions matter little in the grand scheme. Without your actions, I would be bereft of the one person in the world that I care for.” He had to stop and take a breath to compose himself. “You chose to do great harm yourself so that my sister might live. Your sacrifices will not be forgotten.”

“It was just a year or so.” She gave him a self-deprecating smile. “I’d probably have just wasted it anyway.”

“I think not.” He smiled back at her with surprising sincerity. “Besides, the shade’s price is not the matter to which I was referring. I know that Rosina’s death... I know that you would never have chosen to do what you had to do, given any other circumstances.”

Any hint of a smile washed off her face. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

He gave a little nod, almost a bow. It should have been ridiculous, but it wasn’t. “Of course, my apologies.”

Orsina picked up the pouch. It was more money than she had ever held in her entire life. Probably enough to buy half of Sheepshank. Certainly more than it would cost for a carriage out to some town in a distant province where she might disappear. She weighed it in her palm. “You aren’t going to ask me to stay?”

“It would be my preference, certainly, and most likely the best course for you to take, but I cannot force my wishes upon you.” He was very still. As though she were a deer that he feared would spook if he rustled the leaves.

“Right. So... I’m going now.”

She’d only made it a step before he asked, “Is there anything that might convince you to stay? I know that Harmony will be quite beside herself without you. No doubt your studies will suffer also, without an institute of this calibre to guide you. I am certain that you have good reasons for departing, but is there any way in which I could change your situation?”

“Not unless you know how to get me out of meeting the king.”

“Is that what has you so pressed?” His smile now seemed considerably more genuine. “My dear Orsina, the king will scarcely even notice you. While this is a great event in your life, it shall not even feature as the most interesting moment of his hour. Personal attention from the king is unlikely. On a busier day there is a distinct possibility that you shall not even be brought directly into his presence at all, swearing your fealty to the Cerva to his secretary.”

It took the wind out of her sails and she slumped down into the seat opposite him. “You think?”

“While Harmony has been somewhat evasive about your family history, would it be fair to say that you and your family are not of any great political influence at this moment?” Her bark of laughter was answer enough. “You likely could have passed entirely unnoticed were it not for the unpleasantness that we need not speak of again. So long as you do nothing dramatic or scandalous between now and our rapid retreat from the court once you’ve had your disdainful nod, it is unlikely that his highness will even deign to focus his eyes upon you.”

Rocking back in her seat she could almost feel the dread departing. She dropped the money pouch back onto the spread of books between them. The two of them sat smiling at one another for but a moment before Orsina recalled Harmony's marriage suggestion and discomfort crept back in. "Why did you stop me?"

For a moment he seemed at a loss, until finally he seemed to settle upon the right words. "Friends do not let friends make bad decisions."

Settled back into her borrowed bed in her borrowed bedclothes in a body that still didn't feel entirely her own, Orsina was surprised at how easily sleep came to her. It seemed that she had no sooner laid down than her eyes were springing open again to the dawn bells tolling.

Artemio had no hint of a late night about him, looking more presentable when he came knocking upon Harmony's door than he had since the first moment Orsina had set eyes upon him. There was no malingering cloud of wine hanging over him, nor any of the prickly irritation that seemed to fuel his usual snappish wit. Rather he seemed subdued and composed, an entirely different man from the one that she had known until now.

If last night's dress might have bought her passage from the city, this one might well have bought her the horse and carriage in perpetuity. The Prima had it delivered to her moments after dawn when Harmony had only just begun to work herself into a frenzy trying to find something suitable for court in their combined wardrobes.

There were beads stitched onto the fabric that shone like frost in the sunlight. Orsina had almost torn the thing off and fled back inside when she saw that, but Artemio was already there with a hand at her elbow. As he led her on down the path, she hissed to him, "I'm not meant to be drawing attention to myself."

"Then perhaps you might inform your snarl of that fact."

She quickly smoothed out her face, even though she was practically vibrating with tension.

He leaned in scandalously close to whisper. "In the streets of Covotana you shall shine like a jewel, drawing all eyes, but in the palace, every woman is a jewel and you shall fit into the collection invisibly."

It was enough to shut her up. A blush burning at her cheeks from all his courtly manners. They travelled by carriage to the palace and each time that she felt her terror climbing up her throat to strangle her he would catch her eye, or let his gloved hand brush ever so briefly upon her hers as they sat side by side.

They had gone through the process again and again before departure, with their appointment late in the morning there was no shortage of time for repetition. Yet still he repeated his instructions like a litany. "When we arrive at the palace, I shall walk with you as far as I might, but you can trust in the ushers to see you right. The Prima has already written to the court making your intent to visit clear, so it should be a simple matter. You will be announced, so you need not speak. If you do see the king rather than his secretary, do not look boldly into his eyes as you do with my sister and I. Keep your gaze upon his chest, perform your curtsy and then await dismissal. It should all take only a moment. Curtsey again, retreat backwards, turn, leave. I shall await you outside the court. Speak to no-one unless you are forced, and then say only that I am waiting for you. My family name may offer scant protection, but it is now widely known that I am in the king's favour of late."



She couldn't even look at him as she breathed out heavily, feeling every bone of the dress pressing in around her newly filled figure. "Thank you, Artemio."

"Think nothing of it." He said, though it was patently ridiculous. She knew how desperately he must have been burning to return to his work, yet here he was riding along with her, dawdling in the halls of power that he seemed to loathe, all just to offer her some small comfort. Perhaps he was simply ensuring that she did not attempt to bolt again, but if he were a jailor, he made little attempt to intimidate. If she'd expressed a change in heart, she suspected that he'd likely have seen her to the city gates himself. It was a strange situation, made stranger by this sense of debt he seemed intent on using as his guiding principle.

It would have been uncouth to hang out of the carriage window and stare up at the rising spire of the Palace, and Artemio insisted that he would have Harmony take Orsina on a proper tour of the city once she was more fully situated. Yet her admirable restraint in behaving at least a little like a noble lady instead of a gawking peasant in the big city for the first time meant that she had no idea of how close they were to arrival until the carriage doors were hauled open by a guardsman.

Looming in all the livery and shining steel, she realised with a start just how doomed she was if this little deception went awry. A peasant trying to pass herself off as a noble was the sort of story that even her mother back in Sheepshank, far from the reach of kings, would have feared to tell. There could be no happy ending to it.

Still, she held her head high as she passed first under the warming light of the sun and then on into the deep shadow of her impending doom. Artemio walked by her side, and the hand clasped to her elbow was no longer to steer her towards the gaping maw of the palace, but rather to keep the fear from dropping her to her knees.

Yet as they stepped inside and the clamour of bodies all around her pressed in, there was some part of her that was not afraid, and she reached for it. Fear was not her base nature. She had wrestled shades of legend, slain a dragon, bested a graduate Shadebound when her own training had so far consisted of naught but a bath. What could the stern stare of some man in a high chair mean when placed in comparison to all of that? The grain of arrogance was all that she needed to slip into her mask of nobility and stride forth.

Everything was very carefully ordered and timed within the palace, and she was led smoothly from one place to the next with scarcely a word passing from one servant to the next. Artemio had released her elbow now that they were so close to court for fear of tainting her with scandal before she had even begun but without that contact she could not say with any certainty when he had left her. She glanced around as she was led from one chamber to the next and while he was by her side in one, in the next he was gone.

A blur of colour and sound assaulted her senses. Her life before the deception had been simple and small, the most company she'd enjoyed was that of two people, and no more. Here individual courtiers had entirely vanished into the amorphous blob known as "court" there were faces here and there that she might recognise if she glanced askew, family of students at the House that she had encountered, but there were far too many for her to ever hope to pair names to those faces. How anyone could navigate

this place and the tidal shifts of silk and finery, she could not even begin to comprehend. Still, she kept her chin up and her eyes locked upon the servant tasked with leading her.

When one grandiose space opened into the next she scarcely noticed, and when the bluster and batter of noise from all corners abated it was more of a shock than the sudden space devoid of bodies. The long stretch of room between her and the throne. The throne and room were the same white stone from which the whole castle were made, but where elsewhere the stone was smooth here carvings strove to crenelate each exposed inch with patterns and shapes, beasts and men, stories like those on tapestries in less palaces. Her eyes could not stall upon any one part of them, though not a single part was hidden, she needed to maintain her focus and decorum until her name was called.

There were men and women both arrayed between her and the stretch of carpet, every one waiting so patiently it made her want to shout out. She quashed that suicidal urge and pressed her face into a pleasant smile so that anyone who looked upon her might think that this was where she was meant to be, that she was happy to be coming and bowing and scraping before a king she'd never even heard of before this week who somehow had the right to decide whether she lived or died.

Kings were like lightning, exciting to see from a distance, but nothing anyone sane would seek to be close enough to touch. Yet here she stood, knees feeling watery beneath the wide skirt and stomach skipping over itself. She stood her ground and waited.

As Artemio had promised, the king could not have looked less interested in the proceedings. He was present, certainly, but only in the physical sense. His eyes had a glazed look, and his fingers drummed upon the arm of the throne. Orsina couldn't see any good sense to making a chair out of stone when there was perfectly good wood about, but after the first four of her fellow supplicants were called out and did their fealty swearing bobs and nods, she began to understand the necessity of it. If the chair had been comfortable, the King would have been fast asleep by now.

Step by agonising step she moved closer and closer to the carpet running the length of the place. Soon it would be her turn to stroll down, bob up and down and then get out as fast as her legs could carry her. The King himself may not have cared too much about any one of them, but his was not the only scrutiny that she hoped to avoid. There were dozens of courtiers, not waiting for their chance to announce their arrival, but just lurking. Hanging around as though they could think of nothing better to do with their time than bask in the boredom. Their stares were not glazed and she had seen more than a few of them glancing her way before turning to whisper in the ear of another.

The longer she lingered, the more of them seemed to notice her, and before long it felt as though there were more eyes on her than on the poor girl out on the carpet. Even the servants and attendants in livery seemed to be glancing her way more frequently than she'd have expected. She knew that the story of the Aquilla girl's death had travelled as far as the Palace but she'd hoped it may not have reached this very room.

It felt as though she had been there for an hour by the time that she was the next in line to be called, and all of her dread had now contorted into a bloody minded determination to just get through it as quickly as possible. The waiting had been the awful thing, not the thing itself.

She was waiting for her name to be called, body already tensed to move, when the shouting began. The king did not stir from his stupor, but every other head in the court seemed to snap around at the sound outside the grandiose doors of the throne-room that not a one of them had entered by.

Orsina waited for her name. There was a cry in some language she did not know, deep and guttural, and a thump against the wood as if whoever was out there meant to break their way in. The guards to either side of the door looked askance to one another, but neither moved. It was not as though they were the only armed men within the palace. There was no question that whoever was causing such a ruckus would be dealt with imminently.

And still Orsina waited for her name. The whole court had fallen silent, straining to catch a sound from beyond the doors. The usher who was meant to be hustling her forward to get everyone through the day was just as susceptible to a break from the monotony as the rest of them. Orsina almost lost her temper and shouted out her own name before storming down, but before that madness had any opportunity to manifest, the grand doors to the throne room burst open.

To anyone else in the court, the sight of a man towering eight foot high with serpentine scales coating his skin would have been a shock but Orsina had spent too long with Kagan for this man to startle her. The guards from outside the doors lay scattered in his wake, tossed to the ground and struggling like upturned tortoises to regain their feet. His voice roared like crashing mountains through the halls of power, "I speak with kings, not lapdogs."

Those startled guards on this side of the door may have known fear at the sight of such a creature, but they knew their duty well. Both stepped forward to meet this monster with their crescent headed halberds descending and both were cowed with just a snap of his head and a bark. He barked twice at one and once at the other and they were so taken aback that they paused long enough for him to stride through. The king held up his hand to them before they charged, and in that one motion the whole court stilled. "Ambassador, our meeting was scheduled for this afternoon."

The upheld hand did nothing to slow the raging giant's approach. "Arazi do not have time to waste."

Still the king showed surprising composure. He had loomed so large in Orsina's mind throughout the day that she had built him up to be a giant, but this little king on his little throne was dwarfed by the sheer bulk of the man approaching. This Arazi was not dressed in hides the way that Kagan had been. Every inch of exposed skin glistened with scales and everywhere else boiled leather was shaped to his contours. He wore none of the draped finery of the Espher court, but his presence and the fine craftsmanship of the leatherwork he bore put them all to shame. The King called out with a smile, "Then I am delighted to entertain you now."

He waved a hand to the gathered lesser nobility and they began to scatter. All the rest of the line dissolved behind Orsina, but still she stood frozen. She had been so close. Could they not just acknowledge her quickly and then let her move on with her life? Would anyone even remember that she hadn't done her little curtsy before slinking away?

"I am Hazal, the Omen, I speak for the Arazi."

Orsina meant to slink away, she really did. There was no good reason for her to stay in the throne room for a moment longer than was necessary. Every moment had a greater chance of drawing attention to

her and dooming her, but when confronted with one of Kagan's people in all their glory, she found herself rapt.

The king was certainly attentive now, in stark contrast to the bored sneer that he'd worn all day. "Greetings to you Hazel, I assume that introductions are not necessary on my part since you are in my kingdom, and my palace?"

Though she'd chanced a glance at the king and his looming guardsmen while he spoke, Orsina found that there was a hypnotic attraction to the Arazi ambassador. There was a certain stillness that overtook Kagan during the hunt, when all the humanity seemed to drain from him and only instinct remained. The first few times she'd seen it, Orsina had been unsettled, but as with all the strange parts of her life at that time, eventually she had come to accept it for what it was. This Hazel had been in the stillness since the moment that she first laid eyes upon him. In anyone else she would have called it tension, but in truth, it seemed to Orsina to be the complete opposite. The only time that Kagan had ever seemed truly at peace with himself was in those moments before he struck.

Hazel's voice was no longer a roar, more like a slide of gravel than stone slabs colliding. "My people send me to make a generous offer to you, king of ghosts. You shall keep your throne, you shall serve your people and your children can still inherit your titles and lands as ever they did. All that needs to change is your fealty."

The King chortled, "I beg pardon, but it sounded like you just offered me the throne on which I already sit?"

"In exchange for your fealty as our vassal, the Arazi shall protect your people and make them strong. Turning back your enemies and adding your strength to the great conquest." Hazel had stretched out his arms wide. "All you need to do is submit."

The sneering laughter had drained out of the king as swiftly as it came replaced with a cold dead expression that gave nothing away. In her momentary glance towards him, Orsina saw all that she had feared that a king could be. As inhuman as the looming serpent-man before him. "Might I ask why the Arazi think that we would choose to abandon our sovereignty?"

Hazel did not seem impressed. "You are surrounded on all sides by powerful foes. You are too weak to fight them all. They circle like jackals. Waiting for the opportunity to strike."

"And in this little has changed for centuries." The king scoffed. "I might suggest that the Arazi have failed to grasp the strength of Espher."

"How you feel does not matter. Only the reality." Hazel drew himself back up to his full height. "Do you know why I am called the Omen?"

"Because you're terribly fun at parties?" Even Orsina had to be a little bit impressed that he was still quipping in the face of the looming giant.

Hazel paid him no mind. "I am the warning that comes before doom. I am the threat of things to come. Submit to me now, and none of your people need to die begging and screaming for their lives. Submit and you might live on instead of being burned from the annals of history."

If she had been asked before this day what made a king different from a common man, Orsina could not have said, but now she saw it. This foppish little man had a will as strong as tempered steel. "I must decline."

"Then you shall lead your people to their new domain."

Hazal surged forward, hands outstretched to catch the halberd blades as they were swept into his path. The scales on his palms threw up sparks where the sharp edges caught them, but his grip must have been like iron to halt the swings before they could draw a drop of blood. The other guards poured along the carpet towards him. Yet more burst out from cubby holes amidst the graven stonework that Orsina had not even spotted. There were a dozen men barrelling straight for Hazal and the man did not even spare them a glance.

She did not know why she was running forward or why she had not fled. If she had been asked to put any part of her motivation in that moment into words, Orsina would have been at a loss. Later she might have said that she caught the familiar scent of dragon venom in the air before Hazal's jaw slipped open and a great gout of flame leapt forward, or that the shade of Ginny Greenteeth was so attuned to sudden bursts of heat since her rivalry with the Fire Below flared up that the pressure on Orsina's mind gave her warning. Perhaps it was both of those things, or none.

All that mattered was that when the Omen let loose his lethal breath of fire to wash over the king. It met water not air.

For just a moment there was the blinding orange light of flame, then the sudden eruption of steam set all the men stumbling back in shock. The billowing cloud shot straight up between them to wash over the ceiling, and Hazal's surprise gave the guards the moment that they needed to close on him.

What came next was not a great feat of heroism on the battlefield, but butchery. The halberds swung and struck off the scales across the Arazi's skin. The force of the blows knocking him about, but no blade finding purchase. Yet still the guards came on, hacking and hacking until the natural armour gave way beneath the hail of blows and blood began to spray. Hazal's growl echoed out, not pain but rage.

Time seemed to slip back into its normal flow and Orsina cast Ginny out of her as swiftly as she'd come on. The slaughter went on as the guards crowded in. Some casting aside their polearms and drawing swords so that they might better navigate through the storm of violence.

The King stood perched on his throne, robes in disarray, he must have leapt back as soon as the fire burst, and now his eyes darted frantically around the room, settling for just a moment on Orsina's own frightened face. The very attention she had been so desperate to escape.

They were staring at each other wide eyed with shock when Hazal burst free.

Blood covered him, a dozen wounds hung open in his armoured flesh, gristle and muscle open to the air as he leapt out from amidst the storm of blades. With his own arms as a bludgeon he slammed the nearest stalwart defender of the crown to the floor like he was batting a fly. When that brave knight's sword came loose from his grip Hazal ducked another sweep of halberds at his head to snatch it.

Outside the scrum of bodies only the King and Orsina saw him. The King could do nothing, but Orsina raised her hands like she could snatch Hazal from the air and Ginny flooded back through her.

The fog that had spread out across the ceiling spiralled back down and the blood spattered about the pristine white floors leapt up, not to strike the would-be-assassin, but to hold him back. There was not enough water in the room to do that lumbering beast any real harm, but if she could buy the guards a moment to understand what was happening they would do plenty of harm for her.

She lacked the control that experience might bring her, and Ginny was not accustomed to working with anything less than a pool to draw upon. The chains that she lashed about Hazel burst like bubbles as soon as he strained against them, time and again, forming and popping in rapid succession.

There was not enough water, so Orsina pulled with all of Ginny's might to draw more in. The air turned crisp and Hazel's charge faltered. Not because her chains of pond-water had stopped him, but because she had torn the blood from his seeping wounds to fuel them.

He thrust, and blood splattered up onto the throne. Royal blood that ripped away as soon as it was spilt to thump into Hazel's chest and knock him back before he could strike again. Orsina could not see what had happened. All she heard was the cry of the king, abruptly cut off.

It shattered her concentration and already taxed, she lost her grip on Ginny and the shade slipped away.

Sheer weight of numbers bore him back, a press of bodies dragging him down and away with no care for his raking claws. He was a titan, but even a titan would fall when enough pressure was applied. He toppled and was dragged along the carpet, trailing blood as he went.

His gaze passed over Orsina as he went by, but he was so frenzied by that point she could not have said if he'd even seen her. She staggered away as the butchery began anew.

Attendants swarmed around the throne, any hope of seeing what had happened was already thwarted. The press of bodies from outside the chamber had flooded inside now, along with more servants than Orsina could have ever imagined any one person needing. There were cries going up for a doctor, for the queen, for everyone and anyone.

Artemio was at her elbow again before she had convinced her legs that it was time to run. "That could have gone better."