

Children of the Selvaggia
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The first year in the deep dark woods was the hardest on Orsina. Or better to say that for the first year in the deep dark woods, Mother Vinegar was the hardest on Orsina.

Neither girl nor crone had spent much time learning the care of others, both having devoted a similar proportion of their lives to mastering solitude, and both had a stubbornness to them that would have made a mule seem pliant. Neither one was willing to give an inch.

The first days, Orsina was in shock, everything was new, everything was strange. When Mother Vinegar barked a command, she obeyed because she had no clue what else to do, and the old woman was satisfied that everything was as it should be. Then the girl found her footing.

When the morning water needed fetched, she was nowhere to be seen. It was no worry, Mother Vinegar had been fetching her own water long enough. When the herbs needed bundled to dry, she was gone. That was no worry either, clumsy child fingers fumbled knots. No great loss there. Wasn't like there weren't hours enough in the day for doing things before the brat came along.

Beneath the boughs of the Selvaggia, light was a ghost of the world beyond. Green and dappled when it came through, but mostly a forgotten luxury. It was not a forest the way that those in the preened parts of Espher would know it. There were no clean pathways, no trimmed grass, the undergrowth reached as high as the lower branches, and to make progress, you either followed the flow of the woods, trailing along the rabbit trails and streams, or you came with a blade and forced the forest to part.

When the sun came down, only those who kept an eye turned to the sky knew it, and even they would have to check twice. Mother Vinegar knew. She could feel the cold creeping in her bones before the sun touched the horizon. The cold was familiar, the other sensation curling up in her stomach was not. It was not fear. Mother Vinegar was the thing that other people feared, not subject to its whims herself, but she could recognise that curled chill in her gut as kin to fear, a distant cousin perhaps. Descendant from the same root of dread, but not the flowering stem. The girl. Where was the girl?

Selvaggia was not as dangerous as the people of Sheepshank thought it was. The beasts of the true wild that came roaming through were few and far between. The old shades that gathered in the thicket might have given some shepherd or farmer the scare of their life, but they weren't any danger to them. Not really. To the girl though, they presented a lethal risk, one that Mother Vinegar, so intent on getting her settled under her own watchful eye hadn't the chance to warn or ward her against.

A soft woman might have gone running out into the woods to look for her, flapping her arms and fretting. Mother Vinegar sneered instead. If the girl would run off without her leave, then falling to a shade was her just reward. Most of the shades in the forest were weak enough that they'd only manage a sip at her years. Maybe a wrinkle or two would set the girl on the road to behaving herself right. The coil in Vinegar's stomach twisted at the thought of the girl fallen under a briar, shade after shade riding through her, stripping her years away. Still she didn't go and look. That would be admitting defeat.

When Orsina slipped back into the house an hour after sunset, there was no dinner left for her. The bread crust had been thrown out for the birds, the stew scraped from the kettle. Mother Vinegar sat in

her rocking chair, paying her no heed. Not a word was exchanged that night, nor the next day when Orsina took herself out roaming again at the crack of dawn.

Each day the dread coiled, and each night it spun out into rage. Rage that Mother Vinegar swallowed down without a sound. Wouldn't do for the girl to get ideas about attachment. Wouldn't help her to think that the old woman had any love in her heart to share. That was the way folks got broken hearts and bitterness. Any kindness in the girl would be a hole for a shade to climb in through. Better this way, better sour and closed than vulnerable.

The third night the girl came wandering home, Mother Vinegar had a bowl of gnocchi there waiting. Muddy kneed and wide eyed, the girl set to it while the old woman used an old deer-bone-comb to pick the worst of the thickets from her hair. When it hooked in a tangle, she used the knot of hair to drag Orsina's head back like she were about to string a bow. "No more roaming until your work is done. No more roaming at all until I says so." Mother Vinegar gave the hair another sharp tug, "Understand me, brat?"

For a moment the tension held. Comb, tangle, hair, scalp; all straining at their limit. Orsina's eyes met the old woman's glower. A girl of eight years against all the cruelty the forest could instil in a hag. Orsina's hairs began to ping loose as she added to the strain, giving the old woman a slow nod but no answer.

The next morning she was home. The next week, they spoke. Small things at first. How a knot should be tied. How much water to add to the pot. Which herb would bring out the poison with the bile. Which bulb would slow the stuttering heart. There were some who'd spend their life learning the secrets Mother Vinegar swatted down like flies and many more who'd die for the lack of that learning. Orsina took it in stride, never showing an interest or a care. Taking on whatever burdens were thrust her way without complaint.

The only time that her eyes lit up at all was when Mother Vinegar sat her down in the evening and spoke to her of the shades. Through their wanderings they crossed paths with plenty of shades through the day, and every time Mother Vinegar behaved as though the words they whispered and the shadows they cast were not there at all.

The old woman's silence infuriated Orsina. She knew that the shades saw Mother Vinegar and that Mother Vinegar saw the shades. In her deliberate ignorance, Orsina saw the same stubbornness that had let a girl wander the woods unattended. Yet to admit her annoyance would be admitting defeat in this strange game that they were playing.

The evening stories were different from what she was used to. In Sheepshank tales of the shades were rare, and spoken in hushed tones for fear of inviting a shade in by naming it. Mother Vinegar spoke of them with the same dull repetition she rattled off the species of birds or the leaves of herbs. She took all the majesty of a hidden world of wonders and made it mundane. A box of tools. All the stories of Orsina's youth withered in her memory, replaced day by day with facts.

Every word that came out of Mother Vinegar was a fact. Solid as stone and unwavering despite any opinions to the contrary. When she told Orsina things that seemed to make no sense, it was as though she could hear the girl's doubt, yet she never corrected herself. Never wavered. Her world was filled with plants that grew to rhythms unseen, seasons that could be predicted by a glimpse of a bird's

feathers through the thicket and those same facts, applied with the regularity of a poultice to draw all wonder from the world.

A month passed before they went to visit Ginny Greenteeth.

A month was long enough for Orsina to truly believe that all the fearmongering tales that she'd heard about the forest were nothing but tales. She was living under the same roof as the Aceta Madre, and the most frightening thing about her was the smell and the sharp edge of her tongue. The few animals that she had seen roaming the forest were either smaller than her or so afraid that she barely caught a glimpse of them.

The shades were much the same. After being taken by Perlita, Orsina had been dreading every shade that she saw. She reared back from them like a startled mare, watching from the corner of her eye as the old woman pretended not to be looking at her with contempt.

"You've a hole in the heart of you. A hollow. Same with all the Shadebound." It was the first time that they'd actually spoken of what Orsina was. Of what had happened to her back in the graveyard. It took the wind out of her. The old woman toddled on as if it was nothing. Just as she always did. Calling back over her shoulder. "That's why a shade can climb in you. That's why they be wanting you. Not a snack, a home."

Like the rabbits and the birds, the shades of the forest scattered ahead of their coming. Glimpses of them through the dappled light, but nothing more. Every one that flitted away made Orsina all the more the fool for fearing, all the weaker for having been taken by some old woman.

Orsina glowered at them. "Why aren't they coming knocking then?"

There was a hint of a smile on Mother Vinegar's face. "You've got the door shut now. Slammed it and pressed up against it. Maybe even put some locks on. There's few enough of them are strong enough to push in when you're holding it shut."

Greenteeth was waiting at the bottom of her pond in the deep woods. A convergence of all the little streams that ran through the forest amidst exposed stones and moss so thick it would have made a better bed than any Orsina had ever lain down in. She had her marching orders from Mother Vinegar before they'd even set out for the pool. She was not to speak. She was not to touch the water. She was not to reach out to the shade beneath the surface in any way. She was to behave as much like a stone standing still and silent in the midst of the woods as she could accomplish, and even then she was to run the moment that Mother Vinegar addressed her directly. After a month of naught but the glimmers of ghosts, Orsina was understandably sceptical.

Deep in the murky water, Orsina couldn't even see Greenteeth, but by the prickling of hairs on the back of her neck and the shiver that ran through her, she believed Mother Vinegar's words.

"Off your lazy backside. We're here visiting, Gin."

Orsina startled. After all her talk of shades being mindless, now the old woman was chatting away like the presence beneath the water was an old friend.

"What little mouse comes a creeping in? Who wanders so far to see Ginevra Greenteeth. What little babe comes to dip their toes in my pond?"

She'd almost convinced herself that everything that had happened back by the graveside had been a dream, that she was just a little mad and there was nothing to fear. She wished that she was a little mad. A little mad would have been easier.

Orsina heard without hearing. The shade, whispering into her head. She didn't know the voice, but she could taste the mould of old rotten wood and feel the press of drowning water in every word.

"Don't be starting with your nonsense now. You know me Ginny. And mind your manners, there's no toes for eating, neither."

Orsina's giggles bubbled over and they just wouldn't stop no matter how hard she tried to swallow them down. There was a manic edge to them by the time Mother Vinegar turned to face the girl, moving slowly, like when there was a wild animal she was trying not to startle. "It's just like in the stories."

The full weight of Ginerva Greenteeth's attention fell on her. Orsina could taste pondweed, her eyes clouded with algae. Until now she was just catching the edges of the shade's voice, now it thundered inside her.

"What's this little treat you've brought me then?"

Orsina's laughter was strangled by the water she felt bubbling up her throat. Mother Vinegar was glowering at her with enough force to send a grown man running. "Don't you pay her no mind Gin, this daft thing is just about to get sent home with a flogged arse for talking when she was told not to."

"How could we ignore such an offering. So brimming with life. So rich with it. Come into the pool my little dove, the water is lovely and cool".

Orsina's feet moved before she had the chance to stop them. Just a step, but wouldn't it be so nice to cool off after a long day walking through these woods. She hadn't had a proper wash since Mother Vinegar took her in. It would be so easy to just slip into the water and... she stopped.

Mother Vinegar had not moved, she had not made a sound, but a memory had caught her instead. Her body doing things she did not want it to do. Her life trickling away. She stopped dead at the memory, then took a step back.

"You have been teaching her well, Madre, but I shall have her yet."

Now Mother Vinegar moved again. Now her hand closed over Orsina's wrist and the flat of her hand skipped off the back of the girl's skull. A crack that could be heard through the woods, louder than the flowing water.

"I've taught her nothing."

The shame was good, the flush of heat on her cheeks as she blushed, it reminded her that this was her body, it reminded her of how she felt after Perlita rode her. Shamed, worthless. She would not feel that way again.

This time the pond-water washed over her without making it inside. The chill touched her skin, but not her mind. She pushed back. Her arms lifted up, but they didn't need to, it wasn't like there was something real to push back against, no tide to part with a wave. The water ran away from her.

There was a bitter edge to Greenteeth's voice. *Someone has.*

That was all for the first day, and the second. More than anything else, it felt like Mother Vinegar was testing Orsina's limits. They went to visit, and Mother Vinegar and the thing in the water exchanged stories, but nothing more. Meanwhile Greenteeth pried at Orsina, trying to worm its way inside her. It never had the same beginners luck again, and now Orsina understood what they were there for, she pushed back more and more. By the end of their last visit, the shade could barely even be heard above the water.

Walking home from the pond, it was like all the colours were drained from the world. All of the shades, blending away to nothing. Held back by Orsina's will alone. They'd creep back in as the days went by, but now she knew how to push them away. She knew how to close herself to them. The most dangerous thing in the woods became the brambles hanging low from the branches, the odd wild animal roaming through.

By night, the old woman's tales became instruction. She set a stump of candle on the floor between them as it was about to die, and had Orsina watch as the last sputters of wax gave birth to a puff of smoke. Mother Vinegar glanced up from darning a shirt's elbow to mutter. "That's your shade. All they are. Here and gone as fast. You stay well clear of the dying and you needn't fear."

Orsina's brows drew down at that. All the other statements of absolute fact that she'd sat through from the old woman had some grain of truth, but this made no sense at all. "They aren't though."

"What's that you say?" Mother Vinegar's eyes narrowed somewhere down in the thicket of wrinkles. "You know better, do you?"

"If they were gone that quick, we'd never see them. They're all over the woods. I see them every day."

The old woman broke her usually impenetrable stare away. "Catch a puff of smoke under glass, it'll linger."

"Is that all old Ginny Greenteeth is then?" Orsina skipped right to the point. "Smoke in a glass?"

"Some fires make more smoke. Don't they? Wet leaves. Rotten wood."

"But the smoke doesn't last long enough for folks to write songs about it."

"Alright, alright." Mother Vinegar grumbled. "There's things that can be done to stretch them on longer. To keep them going when time should've rubbed them away. Songs and stories, remembering them, that helps them along. Though minding them wrong can twist a shade up something fierce. Make it into something it never was to start. Feeding them too. That's how your kind gird them. Slip them a little life here and there to string them along."

There was a hint of heat in Orsina's voice. "My kind?"

Mother Vinegar's lips pursed. "Hollows. Binders. Necromancers. Your kind."

"So that's what I need to do is it? Feed them up and keep them like pets? Is that why you've got me chatting to Ginny once a week, you want me to tame her?"

"There's no taming a shade. They're not beasts, they're not people, they're smoke. They're echoes."

“Ginny talks real well for an echo.”

“You’ve learned nothing. All this time and you’ve learned not a thing.”

“How am I meant to learn anything when you don’t tell me anything.”

“I do. I did. I just did, didn’t I.”

“Oh the monster in the pond that you’ve been chatting with for weeks isn’t actually talking, you’re just imagining it.”

“Fool girl. You’ve been learning your plants? Do you think the umber pitcher would catch flies without nectar in its trap?”

“So what, she isn’t really speaking?”

“Anything can make a noise. Do you be thinking mockingbirds are thinking out their answers too? To think you need a head, shades have naught.”

The old woman looked to be genuinely incensed. Orsina had been a quick study, and wise enough not to argue when she was told things, she’d offered little opportunity for Mother Vinegar’s supposedly acid tongue to be used. It was strange enough to her that she was taken aback.

“Why are you so angry about this?”

“Because if you think of them as people, they’ll work on you and they’ll win you, and you’ll die. They’ve all the time in the world to worm their way in your head if you let them. Don’t give them a way in. Don’t give an inch. Don’t let them fool you, girl. They only need to get past you once and you’re done.”

Sullen silence settled over Orsina as she bit back every answer that came bubbling up. How could Mother Vinegar be old friends with Ginny Greenteeth and not believe that the shade could think? How could she know shades by name, but not think they were any different from a carnivorous plant? Orsina couldn’t wrap her head around it, but she still had a healthy fear after all that had happened in her short life, so she took the words as truth, even if her heart called them a lie.

And so the months rolled on.

For all the native aggression of the woods, there were people living within them. To start with; Orsina and Mother Vinegar dwelled within the old stone-built cottage just an hour’s hard walk from Sheepshank, halfway between a ruin and a home.

They were not alone. At the furthest northern reach of the Selvaggia, the men of the steppes cut down snow-weighted pines for their spear-shafts, and while their hunters rarely roamed this far afield, with no stars to navigate by, Orsina had already met a half dozen of them in her time.

Steppes men were strange to her eyes, pallid and shorn, stitched into furs and marked with bright inks beneath their skin. She did not fear them, as other girls of Espher surely would have, because by the time that they came to her neck of the woods, they were half starved and terrified. It was a coin’s toss between whether Mother Vinegar would invite them in for stew or run them off when they got close enough for her to take notice. The beardless ones were more liable to get supper before finding their feet on a northbound trail, but there was no real logic to it.

Beyond those lost souls, and the shades that seemed to fester and multiply beneath the canopy, there was only one person that young Orsina saw with any sort of regularity through her youth in the forest.

Kagan.

The first time that he came to the mossy heap Mother Vinegar called home, it was so deep into the dead of night that even the old woman, who seemed to thrive on only a few hours a night, had drifted off. Orsina had stirred to the sound of the kettle being stirred and the fire stoked, but thought little of it. The old woman kept her own time, sipping soup in the odd hours and fighting the chill of night however she must.

In Sheepshank, Orsina had the comfort of a bed. A little cot tucked away in the corner with a straw mat, but a bed all the same. It was one of the few things she looked back on fondly. Here she slept on the cracked flagstones by the fireplace with a fur wrapped around her to keep the chill of the earth from climbing in while she slept.

A boot nudged her backside, and her eyes popped open. Kagan looked down at her with just as much surprise as she was feeling. The two of them stared at each other for a long moment by the light of the stoked embers.

Orsina's eyes had more or less settled now, and the wild curls of her hair had been bound up in a braid rather than run the risk of catching in the undergrowth. She looked more or less like any girl who spent her days living wild would.

Kagan's eyes were golden by the firelight, vertically slit. He was hairless. Horny scales had risen up out of the skin along his brow-line, and there was a dusting of flatter ones elsewhere. A ridge of them across the top of his bare head. A tracery of them along his jawline, thickening up towards ears that had fused back into the sides of his skull. If a man and a lizard had a child together, it would not look like Kagan, but if that child went on and bred only on humans for a few generations then Kagan would be a good approximation of its grandson. The parts that were man seemed just as foreign to Orsina as the parts that were serpent.

Olive skin, sun darkened, was the norm in Espher, and Kagan's was within a few shades of that, but his features could not be more different. A wide squared jaw, hawkish nose and heavy bags under almond shaped eyes marked him as a foreigner as surely as the reptilian traits marked him as alien in other ways.

His voice was what really startled Orsina. Deep and resonant, she could feel the bass of it in her bones. "Why's there a kid on your floor?"

Somewhere out of sight, Mother Vinegar was banging through her herb cabinets. "Apprentices that do their chores get to sleep through the night. Leave the brat be."

"Apprentice? Didn't think witching was the kind of job you could teach." He crouched down beside her, the soft leathers that he wore folding without a sound. "Is she treating you right, kid? Are you learning how to bitch out a man for getting cut and then charge him a whole side of boar to stitch him up?"

"You think my words are no more than a dog's barking. No wonder you never pay them any heed, eh? I tell you time and again..."

“Just because they’re down doesn’t mean they’re done fighting. See, I do listen.”

Mother Vinegar snarled. “If you really listened you’d have less scars, eh?”

“And you’d have less bacon.”

In their years together, Orsina had heard many strange sounds from the old woman. Croaks and snorts. Groans and grunts. This was the first time that she heard Mother Vinegar laugh. Whatever remnants of sleep still clung to her were brushed away by her surprise and she popped upright to see if her ears were deceiving her.

The cackle was gone and the usual sour expression back on Mother Vinegar’s face by the time that Orsina saw her, but by then it was too late. There could be no doubt of what she had just heard.

The girl’s mouth opened and the first thought in her head sprang right out. “What are you?”

Kagan threw back his head and laughed, jagged teeth all on display. “I’m a hunter, girl. A tracker. Best that there is. What are you when you aren’t a foot-stool?”

She scrambled to her feet, furs still wrapped around her and he had to stand himself or risk be knocked off balance. “Mother Vinegar says I’m going to be a witch. An even better witch than her.”

“She said that?” He glanced up at Mother Vinegar, smirking. “Did she?”

“The brat’s talking out her rear end. Ignore her.”

Orsina shrugged. “She didn’t say it, but she thinks it really hard.”

“I couldn’t have been cursed with a more worthless apprentice, slovenly, foul tempered, stench-riddled...” the old woman trailed off.

Orsina had a smug little smirk on her face. “She thinks it.”

When their eyes met, Kagan recoiled.

He’d always thought that the dire repercussions of meeting eyes with a witch were just talk. In all his dealings with Mother Vinegar, they’d behaved perfectly normally and he’d felt nothing like this. His own magic, fragile as it was after all these years away from home, felt like it was being strangled.

He was a afraid of this child all of a sudden. So he did what he’d always done when he was afraid. He stepped forward and offered her his hand. “I’m Kagan.”

She eyed his hand with suspicion for a moment. Spotting the claws protruding beyond his fingerless gloves. With a shrug she took hold. “Orsina.”

“Pleasure to meet you.”

Their introduction was cut short as Mother Vinegar barged through with the kettle full of boiling water. “If you’re both done flapping your lips, we’ve work to do. Since you’re up, girl, fetch me out the bone needles and some clean rags.”

“Yes Mother.” For all of Mother Vinegar’s clucking about the girl, there was no denying that her apprentice sprang into action when asked. Kagan couldn’t have made sense of how the old woman filed

her belongings away in little cubby holes around the cottage, but the girl knew her way around everything well enough that she didn't even need light to fetch out the suede wrapped needles.

Kagan was stripped to the waist by the time she returned, and laid out in front of the fire. He'd been so glib before that Orsina hadn't even realised how badly he was hurt. There were gashes notched across his ribs, not a boar's goring tusks, but the claws of something bigger. Thick scales ran down the length of his spine and over his shoulders, but his flanks seemed to be exposed and human.

Curiosity got the better of her, and she crept closer to the man where he lay. "What did that to you?"

Mother Vinegar cut Kagan off before he could even start. "Rest your rump here, girl. You'll be the one making these stitches when I'm gone, eh?"

Kagan twisted his head to the side to try and see them. "Planning on going somewhere?"

Mother Vinegar hissed at him, and he turned back around rapidly. It was a bad idea to antagonise your surgeon. "Some folk have the decency to age, eh?"

When she jabbed the needle into his side, Kagan didn't flinch. Orsina supposed that if he could hop around and make jokes while he had the flesh carved away from his bones, a little more pain wouldn't trouble him.

Orsina leaned in as close as she could without blocking the firelight, and ran a reverential hand over the scales on the outside of Kagan's arm when she should have been watching Mother Vinegar's industrious stitching. "What is he?"

Kagan lifted his head to answer again, but a tut from Mother Vinegar had him lie back down with a groan. "He be what he says he is. Best tracker in the woods. His people, the Arazi, they can feel what beasts are feeling, think what they're thinking. He can touch souls with a beast, and he uses it to kill them, or worse."

"What's worse than killing?" Orsina had drawn her hand back. Reverence fading all too fast.

"There's folks in the city would love some beast of the wild to keep as a pet. Locked up in a cage all its days when its blood screams at it to run and hunt. There's worse folk yet that'll set beast on beast to watch them fight."

Into the heaped furs, Kagan rumbled. "It's a living."

"It's a monstrous waste of the gift of your blood, and you ought to be ashamed." Mother Vinegar tugged hard on the gut-thread, drawing the wound shut and making Kagan grunt with pain.

Kagan moaned. "Can the girl do the rest?"

"She's had no practice." Even as she said it, she was handing the needle off to Orsina, who looked at its bloodied length with no small amount of horror.

"Can't hurt worse than your gentle touch."

The sad truth was that for all that Orsina had heard about the wickedness of this hunter so far, he'd judged her right. She couldn't bring herself to hurt him, even if he was as monstrous as Mother Vinegar

said he was. She'd watched her own mother stitching clothes often enough to know how it was done, and for all that skin had its own horrible elasticity, she'd done trickier things at Mother Vinegar's behest before. Reaching into beehives to lift out wax. Skinning rabbits in one tug. Blocking out the voice of Green Tooth when it called to her across the forest. She distracted herself with chatter. "Where are you from?"

He grumbled into the furs once more, eventually turning his head enough to say. "I travel where the hunt takes me."

She dipped the needle back into his skin, taking as much care as she could to keep him from harm. "But where did you come from, I've never seen anyone like you before?"

This time his grunts and grumbles were the only answer at all. Mother Vinegar sank down by the fire, a cup of some steaming herbal concoction clasped between hands so old they were barely more than bones. "Sore subject, for this one. He's an exile."

This time, Orsina tugged a little harder on the thread. "Are you in exile because of what you do to the animals?"

That drew out a laugh from him at least. "You think the Arazi give a damn how I treat their strays? If you even knew what they do with... If you had any idea the things I hunt in these woods, you'd eat your words. They'd give you nightmares, little girl. Thunder lizards, wyverns, saber cats. All the things you read about in story books, they're real and they'd come eat you up if it weren't for me leading them off, hunting them down and selling them along."

The next stitch went smoother, and the next. She had found her rhythm. "I don't read stories, and I'm not scared of lynx or lizard."

"No stories?" Kagan looked up at Mother Vinegar with disdain. "What kind of education are you giving this child?"

The old woman drew a long noisy sip from her cup. "She'll be needing her feet on the ground, not her head in the clouds, eh?"

"Childhood without stories," He exhaled heavily. "It's like a bed without a blanket."

"We make do without either here." She slurped once more, then added. "Though the girl will likely want to thank you for that fur she sleeps on."

Orsina let it slip from around her shoulders, then shuddered in the chill. "This was yours?"

He shrugged, tugging one of her stitches back open. "That old bat has sewn me up more often than I can count. Only seems fair to give something in return."

Mother Vinegar leaned a little closer. "Did I hear you rightly when you said you had a side of boar for me this time?"

"Still hanging out in the woods, draining off." He kept trying to turn and see what Orsina was doing, even though it was quite impossible to look at his own back. "Suppose the wyvern didn't have a taste for it. She wanted a bite of me instead."

“You put your beast down before trailing blood to my door, eh?” It was phrased as a question, but it had the weight of a demand.

“Dead. Had a buyer all ready for her too. I just lost some good money.”

Orsina closed up the last gash. “Nearly lost more than that.”

“True enough.” He laughed then winced as it pulled at his stitches. With exaggerated slowness, he rolled over to face Orsina, watching as she wiped his blood off her hands with a tattered scrap of cloth. “My thanks to you.”

“Thanks? She doesn’t need thanks, she needs that side of pig, eh? You’ll take her out to fetch it come dawn before some other beast is off with it.”

Orsina took the news without complaint, but Kagan rumbled. “I will, will I?”

“You’ll be doing that, and the next time you’re passing you can bring me some more of the blue-green berries from the north-woods. The last batch have all dried up over the summer.”

Orsina had retrieved the fur and returned to her place by the hearthstone, settling down to catch what little sleep was left in the night. She didn’t lay down yet. Instead she watched as the serpent man and the witch sniped back and forth at each other.

“You can use them dried.”

“Not if I’m needing the juices.”

“And why would anyone be needing the juices?”

“Because nursing babes take just as bad with shaking-fever as their mothers, and they haven’t the teeth for chewing, eh?”

With a grumble, Kagan settled back down. “You strike a hard bargain. Fine. I’ll bring you all I can carry, and half the pig.”

“You’ll bring the whole pig or I’ll pull that thread out of you, eh?” She prodded at him with her foot. “Three days you’ll be staying here, what use have you for a rotten half-pig in three days’ time? We’ll strip it and hang it and when you come back around there’ll be tack ready for you.”

He didn’t agree, but he did lie down and shut up, which the old woman seemed to take as a sign that she’d won the argument. With a satisfied little huff, she started ambling, tidying away the mess that his coming had made in the carefully ordered mess that she usually cultivated.

This close, Orsina could still smell Kagan’s blood. She could hear the soothing rhythm of his breathing, the tempo stuttering when he drew in too deeply and the pain of his wounds troubled him. She didn’t mean to care. Mother Vinegar schooled her against it with rigour. It did no good for a witch to care about the folks she tended. It would make her slow to cut away what needed to be cut away. Slow to choose who should live and who should die.

Orsina was a child still, for all the burdens she bore. She could not prune away feelings as soon as they grew. She had no love for this strange creature nestled on himself at the far side of the fire, but she felt some entanglement all the same. She was still trying to pick that feeling apart when sleep took her.