

**The Coming Dawn**  
***Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

Orsina did not think that a day would ever come that she willingly walked into the palace of Covotana, but it seemed that her new desire for survival at any cost meant that she was now willing to plunge her hand into a hornet's nest if it meant getting what she needed. The discomfort and the fear would pass, but what she had come for would remain.

Walking the streets of the city in the dress of a noblewoman was an ongoing series of revelations. The first of which was that her mind seemed to have returned to her in her sleep. It was not the same as it had been, it was as though she were thinking through layers of thin vellum that overlaid all of her own ideas with those that had belonged to others. There was some distortion, and sometimes her own thoughts were harder to make out clearly, but more often than not, these overlaid structures actually served to help her, to give her own thinking a scaffolding to build upon. She did not need to pay heed to any thoughts but her own, but neither did she ignore them, when more often than not they helped her.

The second revelation was that she was safe. Even back in her own village, far from the beating heart of the kingdom, it would not have been thought proper for a young woman of marriageable age to go wandering around without any sort of chaperone to protect her from unwanted advances, but here in this thriving city where she could see more men on a single street than she'd ever encountered in the whole of Sheepshank, there was no danger to her at all. Perhaps if she'd been a commoner still, then her experience would have been different, but it seemed that wealth and station mattered infinitely more in the world than what happened to be between her legs.

She couldn't imagine the punishment a common man might have received for laying hands upon a noblewoman, but presumably it was a gruesome enough threat that most of these men did not dare to even look her in the eyes after taking note of her dress.

Dressing herself that morning had been a struggle. A noblewoman's clothes were not meant to be assembled by a single person. If anything, just her and Harmony had already been pushing the bare minimum number of hands that were required, and so on this morning, after donning a shift that she'd stolen from the shared wardrobe that Harmony had left behind for her to cover the worst of her scars, she'd been forced to call in one of the servant girls to assist her. She'd never felt more of a fool than standing there as a girl who was likely a good few years older than her dithered about, tweaking and tying where she needed.

There could be no denying the results however, she looked truly wonderful. Which was good, because it would help her to remain invisible in the eyes of the court, if Artemio's tales were to be believed. If anything he'd said was to be believed.

She tried not to make assumptions about where the Volpe twins had vanished to. She tried not to second guess her friendships. Yet with their final meeting missed, it was difficult not to believe all the worst things that her anxious heart whispered in the night. She did not want to need them, she did not want to rely on any of the nobles who would look upon her as nothing but filth if they knew the truth of her blood, but neither could she make it through all of the twists and turns of this maze of manners without a guide.

By the time that she reached the palace and strolled across the vaulting bridges over the beautiful blue waters, it was midmorning. Without cash or carriage, the city seemed to grow imperceptibly broader with each step.

There were guards barring the way when she reached the palace doors, but she was a noblewoman, so they had no reason to stop her passage. After all of the walking required to reach this city to start with, this was not enough to tire her, or draw forth an unsightly sweat, so they had no reason to think she was not simply taking in the pleasant weather while it lasted. She asked where she might find Artemio Volpe, and within a few minutes there was a servant offering a gloved hand to lead her through the many chambers of the palace to her goal.

Never in all of her life had things gone so smoothly for Orsina. As though all the world were re-arranging itself around her to suit her whims. This was the real magic that the nobility of Espher wielded, not necromancy, but mastery of all around them. Now that she'd tasted it, she wondered if she could ever go back to a world where every single moment was a struggle.

They led her past tapestries worth more than her childhood home. Past paintings that showed landscapes mysteriously devoid of the people who worked them. The only people in art were the ones who had the wealth to commission a painter. The only residents of this fantasy Espher were those who ruled it.

Orsina wondered if this fantasy was the world the nobles truly lived in. A world of invisible servants making everything easy for them, so that when they were forced to look down upon the peasants, they wondered at how inferior they were, to struggle so, when life was so easy.

The austere silence of the palace began to fracture as she drew closer to her journey's end. There were shouts echoing through these hallowed halls. Hissing whispers in every niche in the white stone. Noblemen, braying and bellowing to one another like goats in the field. Orsina had to push herself forward against the dense wall of noise, and to still the urge to squeeze at the white gloved hand in hers for comfort. The voices did not seem to be raised in anger, only to be heard over the raucousness. If anything, the majority of them sounded smugly amused with their own statements, whatever they may have been.

Eventually, the servant led her carefully up onto a finely carved and polished wooden balcony overlooking the source of all the furore and for the first time in her life, she saw the Teatro. The noble court where lords laid out the laws of the land, and advised the king in governance sounded like a tavern in full swing.

There were other ladies reclining about this balcony, and no small number of lesser nobles too. For a moment or so, Orsina was hopeful that she might spot Harmony among their number, but her friend was nowhere to be seen. A few women from the House recognised her, and gave her withering glances, or confused looks, depending upon their particular feelings towards her. For now neither much mattered to Orsina. The servant who'd led her this far was now gone back to his duties, and any hope of questioning them was lost. She knew what she was seeking and she would not be turned from her course. Stepping forward to the balustrade, she leaned out over the rising chaos clamouring below.

Every nobleman of Espher seemed to her eyes to be gathered down below in all of their matching suits and ties. If there were some way to differentiate them at this distance, she did not know it. The red hair

of the Volpes was her only guide in seeking Artemio out, but it seemed entirely fruitless in the sea of olive skin and black hair. She would have fit in perfectly down there if she had a man's suit, but Artemio, he was notable in his absence.

A sudden trumpeting from up by the empty throne at the end of the chamber brought all the chatter to an abrupt end. Then some wizened old gentleman in a frankly ridiculous robe lined with fur stepped forward to read from a scroll. "Next order of business. The Arazi menace."

It was enough to silence the gathered men for almost a whole breath before they burst out into another round of bellowing. For a moment, Orsina wondered how anything actually got done, when a thump from the far end of the chamber drew silence out once more. It was a woman, dressed strangely in black clothing, with all of her hair clipped away until it was only a fine dark sheen upon her scalp. She did not wear slippers or heels at the bottom of her dark clothing, but boots, and it was the stamp of those boots that had silenced the nobles and drawn their attentions. "The God Emperor has declared the Arazi heretics and deviants for their foul bond with the serpents of the earth. He offers up aid in this time of Espher's need."

It was infinitely more effective than the tooting of the horn. Deathly silence spread as her words echoed over them. The owl shade echoed in her memory, regurgitating pellets of peripheral knowledge to her. The Agrantine Empire. Their theocracy. Their emperor. She had not taken in any knowledge of these things, but from foot-notes and implications she could build a picture. There was little tone in the dry academic texts that had been dumped wholesale into her mind, but still her presiding image of Agrant was that of a hunting cat, lurking just beyond the city walls, searching for a way in to the penned cattle.

If they were invited in, there would be no getting them out without bloodshed. Some grey-bearded councillor rose from his place on the velvet benches below and replied as politely as was possible that Agrant could travel freely through Espher over his dead body, and that seemed to be the consensus. His exact wording made it seem more like the impending invasion of dragons was a small matter that could be dealt with effortlessly by the standing army, rather than an existential threat, but Orsina had the impression that among men such as these, every problem was made to sound small, so that any praise a solution garnered would be similarly lacklustre, and any blame, more easily deflected.

The shaven woman seemed to slip back out of sight as seamlessly as she had appeared fading back into the crowd as though she had anticipated this turn of events, as though she had known any help she offered would be rejected but this was simply another step in the dance.

Orsina could not understand how it was that decisions were being made in the king's absence, but she supposed that small problems might be solved by lesser nobles, with only the largest troubles being brought before the head of state. She personally would have thought that a rampaging army of dragons would qualify as a major crisis, but what did she know? She was just a peasant, after all.

She could not follow all the arguments back and forth that burst out beneath her, in part because there seemed to be six of them ongoing at any one time, and in part because nobody ever seemed to say what they meant. Every noble in the teatro seemed to be putting on a show for their peers, showing how wittily they could work their way around the points that others were making, not by saying that they opposed them or why, but by framing them as abstracts and poking holes in the logic. It was frankly exhausting to listen to, and by the end of the first few minutes, Orsina was already looking for a way out

of the room so that she didn't have to endure any more. The nobles about her were tittering, as though the whole thing was entertainment. Of course they were. They had never felt the touch of dragon's fire, and should an army come, it would not be them taking to the field to face it.

Like a leaden weight in her gut, it struck Orsina that should an army of fire-breathing monsters come tearing over the horizon, it would fall to her fellow Shadebound to face it. To her. She had not powdered her face that morning, as Harmony would have doubtless suggested, and that was for the best. All the sweat she had not shed in her slow stroll to the palace was coming now. Prickling up cold on her brow.

Could she face a dragon again? Could she stand her ground, knowing what their fire felt like on her skin, knowing the way that they moved, not like beasts but like a storm, tearing through all they touched, buffeting down all that they did not? Fear ignited a fire beneath her rib-cage. What should have been terror burned into anger. The same passion that had driven her to the tower of the owl and here today. Determination to survive wreathed in the fury at what she was being forced to do just to live.

When all of her internal turmoil had passed, the conversation had turned too. She learned in snippets, that the Arazi ambassador that she had restrained was now dead. There were oblique references to questioning him, but nothing to suggest that he gave any answers before he met the headsman's sword.

Still there was no sign of Artemio or Harmony. Caught up in all the drama of court, Orsina had almost forgotten why she had first come here. She returned to her fruitless searching as the King himself appeared at the end of the chamber and once more the scattered arguments fell to silence.

Orsina half expected to see Artemio in the man's shadow, dogging his steps, but still there was no sign of him. For the length of a breath the silence went on, then the king was settled into the throne on the dais and the official business of the teatro seemed to begin.

From the far end of the chamber from the king emerged a jailor in the black hood of an executioner, dragging a prisoner along at the end of a chain. The man who followed was tall but bent by the weight of chains, broad in the shoulder, but malnourished from his time in captivity. Orsina did not know him, until he forced his head up from where it rested on his chest and Kagan stared out.

There were whispers among the gathered nobles, and those in the front seats seemed to lose their courage as Kagan passed them by, scrambling up and away to trip over their peers. It seemed that word of the ambassador's fire-breathing had not been suppressed. Once again, Orsina felt her heart leap to her throat and she strained to hear what was being said on the floor below.

"...caught within this very city, spying upon our defences for his kin. Is there anyone who will speak for the accused?"

All of the day's mutters were dying down. All of the raucous bantering that had characterised this room up until this very moment now completely vanished in the face of a real question. Nobody was going to speak. It struck Orsina, almost as swiftly as the realisation that Kagan's life was now in the balance. Sweet, kind Kagan who had cared for her as a child, who had taught her the ways of the woods, and protected her from the beasts of the wild places. He was going to die for this preposterous idea that he was a spy.

If she spoke, all eyes would be upon her. The whole court would know her. The king, who had so far overlooked her, would know her face and her name. Her life would be in danger. Still she opened her mouth and tried to shout out.

Instead she made a strangled little noise as the doors to the chamber slammed open once more and Artemio strode in.

He was a wreck. There were bruises and cuts all over his face, one of his hands was swathed in bandages, and his perpetually pristine suit dangled limp and awkward off hunched shoulders. Of him and Kagan it was difficult to say who looked the most brought low since the last time Orsina had seen them. Still, he walked up the length of the teatro to the same desolate silence as had greeted Kagan, and he spoke clearly enough, though drawing a deep breath seemed to pain him. "I shall speak for him. This dragon-lord gave me true and honest answers that assisted me in my duties to the kingdom, and in return I promised that I would request whatever clemency your majesty might offer."

The king did not look at him, and he did not look at the king. It was as though their eyes passed one another by. The grey-beard spoke up in the king's stead. Perhaps he was the royal mouthpiece. "You speak to his character?"

"He was always entirely honest with me, and it is my understanding that even under duress he has not made a confession of guilt. If he speaks the truth, and he does not confess guilt, that suggests that he is not guilty, does it not?" Artemio attempted a smile, but it turned to a flinch mid-way. What had happened to him in the few hours that they'd been parted?

"Yet for whatever masquerade of good character he might have shown, he still cannot provide an answer as to why he was within Espher's borders." Greybeard seemed quite startled to find that the king had spoken for himself. Artemio looked equally surprised.

"I cannot speak to that, your majesty. Only to what I myself have observed."

"And what say you, serpent spawn?"

Kagan said nothing. Even here and now with his life in the balance, he did not speak. He did not endanger her new life. Orsina could feel tears welling up in her eyes, gratitude turned bitter. Kagan could not have known that she had allies in the court, the Prima and all of the rest, who would protect her from scrutiny. He could not have known that his position was so much more precarious than her own. He was trying to do what he had always done. He was trying to keep her safe.

"Who accused him of being a spy?"

She heard the voice ring out, impetuous and proud, and it took the longest time for her to realise that it was her own.

There was a great deal of murmuring from down on the floor below, and Artemio's head snapped around, though it clearly caused him pain, but the king's mouthpiece dutifully examined his papers and answered. "He was found roaming the streets of the city by night by the guard."

"This man is no spy, your majesty. He has been living in Espher for longer than you or I have been alive. He... he was the huntsman on my family's lands."

Artemio was the one to snap back his answer. Irritation with her vying with irritation at his own suffering as he lifted his voice. "And why would a dragon lord live as a huntsman, precisely?"

Casting about for an answer, Orsina realised that the truth was all she needed. "Ask him his name."

The greybeard piped up once more, reading from his papers. "Kagan."

There was a loose thread in this tapestry, and like she'd known he would, Artemio pounced on it. "Kagan the what? The Arazi are not considered to have reached maturity without earning a deed-name."

Artemio fell to one knee beside Kagan, flinching with every motion, and he laid a hand on the other man's shoulder, drawing him from whatever stupor he had sunk into rather than facing the reality about him. "What is your name?"

The Arazi's voice rumbled deep enough to set the front rows of preening lordlings scampering back once more. "Kagan."

Artemio didn't even try at cleverness. "Your full name?"

There was no way around it, and the poor man was so broken down after so long in the dungeons that he did not even try to resist announcing his great shame. Still, his voice cracked as he huffed out, "Kagan the Exile."

It set off another round of murmurs throughout the teatro. The grey bearded man looked askance to the king, and the king looked up to see Orsina standing up on the balcony. He blinked at the sight of her, then asked plainly, "Do you vouch for this man?"

There was a trick in here. A trap. Orsina knew it, but she had no way of getting around it. "I do."

"Then that is all that I require." With a flamboyant flick of his wrist, the king brought it all to an end. "Rise, Kagan the Exile, a free man."

The hooded jailer was so taken aback by the sudden change in his charge's fortunes that he dropped the ring of keys when he meant to undo the chains, and Artemio was forced to press them into his hands as he rose stiffly to his feet. Between the three of them, they had Kagan unbound in but a moment. Still, the giant of a man seemed lost and blind to what was happening about him. Punch-drunk, as Mother Vinegar called it.

The King rose up from his throne and a deathly silence rang out. Ending whatever furious whispers had started up in the stands. "It is with great sorrow that we find ourselves indebted to you, Kagan the Exile. You should not have been treated as a stranger, but as kin. Espher is a land open to all, and knowing that I have so wronged one of my citizens troubles me greatly."

Once more Orsina had the sense of a trap snapping shut, but she could do nothing but stand and watch. The King glanced her way. "If your mistress would be so kind as to free you from her service, I have an opening in my own household, and it would bring me great joy to grant you a title as the Master of Hounds."

Once more the whispers became raucous. Such a thing was absurd, some serpent-man granted a place in the king's own household, a place of such high honour as his personal huntsman? It made no sense, but for all that the wrongness of it pressed in on Orsina from her borrowed memories, she could not

look the king in the eye and say no. She just couldn't. She had already been shown great favour today, she couldn't throw it back in the man's face.

Kagan turned to look up at her with a blank stare, recognition only now creeping onto his face. She gave the king her best curtsy, which Harmony would have doubtless called abominable, and she dipped her head in obedience. She had saved Kagan from the executioner and the king was offering him a great gift, it was not her place to stand in the way of her friend's success, even if something felt off about the whole matter.

Artemio dipped into a low bow towards the king as Kagan was led off by servants, then he stormed off back down the length of the hall beneath the piercing stares of all his peers. Every nobleman in Espher seemed to be there, scowling down at him. Orsina wondered that he could bear the weight of it all.

She only wondered for a moment before she realised that her chance to catch him and learn what was going on was swiftly departing. He did not run, she doubted he could, given the state he seemed to be in, but nonetheless he was out the doors faster than she could think.

Kagan was vanishing one way, Artemio the other. Her oldest and dearest friend in all the world being delivered into what he'd called a nest of vipers with none of his wits about him, or her new friend's brother, who had only ever been polite and frosty towards her, but could provide her with the solution she needed to survive and thrive. There was a crossroads here, another trap closing, she could feel the tension of it quake through her. She had to decide which to follow after.

She turned and headed down the stairs, brushing past servants and noblewomen alike in her dash. She tripped twice over her skirt and would have gone tumbling were it not for the brass handrail imbedded in the white stone of the palace stairwells. At the bottom she turned from the gathered crowds and set off with all haste. She brushed past more and more bodies as she went, an even blend of nobles and servants that gradually tipped in the favour of the common man as she made her way through to drabber and dimmer passages where it seemed clear she was not meant to be. Catching one likely servant by the wrist she demanded to know where Artemio Volpe was being roomed, and it seemed that she had carried enough of her haughtiness over from the teatro that they did not dare to argue.

With her haphazard directions, she set off once more, twisting out from behind a tapestry into a dark room she might have called a cellar were it not for the fact she had not descended. There were barrels aplenty that she had to weave through to reach the dim outline of a door. The next room was a dazzling contrast, and open skylight bringing all the midday sun down into what she'd have called a kitchen, were it not for the absence of any means of preparing food. Wine and cheese, oil and bread, all were being assembled here by fretful servants, flowers brought in from the gardens to garnish them. A whole room, devoted to assembling the little snacking platters that the nobility of Espher seemed to browse upon endlessly while they spoke amongst themselves.

She could not spare it a moment's thought right now, the ridiculousness of such a thing, instead she turned to the first door she felt certain was not another store-room and she set out, striding through open courtyards and closed corridors so rapidly that she felt as though the world were spinning her through night and day too quickly. She rounded a corner, still following the servant's instruction and struck Artemio head on. Their skulls clattering together and both falling back with a cry.

Flames leapt up about Artemio's hands and before either one had a chance to think, Orsina had enclosed his wrists in her grasp and flooded Ginny Greenteeth's chill water out to douse them. By the time it was done, he was gaping at her wild eyed, and she saw the damage that he been done to him. He still bled from some of his wounds. Bruises were only now beginning to blossom where he'd been struck. It was only now with his hands before her that Orsina could see the real damage that had been done to him. "What the hell happened to you?"

For a moment she saw emotions chasing across his face before he could lock them down. Confusion and fear, anger and relief. "What are you doing here?"

"I came looking for you." She blurted out. "I mean, Harmony." A blush crept up her cheeks. "Both of you."

He plucked his arms from her grasp, took a look along the corridor to be sure that they were currently alone, then he let his weight fall against the wall. It took him a moment before he could get his next words out, and Orsina wondered if there might have been a wound hidden somewhere inside him, sapping his strength. He grumbled, "And why would you do a thing like that?"

"Well it is a good thing I did, since you look like you literally can't survive a day without me." Without a second thought, she slipped an arm about his shoulders and took on some of his weight. She may have been slightly built, but she'd had a life of manual labour to make what little muscle she bore as dense as mahogany wood. Together they set off in the direction he'd been headed. Perhaps they'd pass for lovers if they were not studied too closely. She didn't know where they were going, but hoped that he might mention it before they ran out of corridor to walk.

Once they were in a rhythm, he asked again, "What do you want Orsina?"

The almost casual use of her name after so long with him dipping and ducking and calling her miss gave her almost as much of a startle as the state she'd found him in. In his exhaustion, he drew out the truth of the matter, because she felt like too much obfuscation might end in him blanking out the conversation entirely. "I need help."

As they rounded a corner, he let out a groan. "And do I strike you as a person in any position to offer that assistance to you in this moment."

They limped on a little further as Orsina tried to come up with an answer, before finally settling on, "You're all that I've got."

He let out a sigh that seemed to drain his entire body of its mass, then he picked up the pace, dragging her along behind him where before she'd borne his weight. "Come along then, swift as you like. We've plans to make."

There were twists and turns as they delved deeper into the palace, more of the drab servant's tunnels, hidden from the sight of the palace's owners, like they were passing through a mousehole each time they ducked behind a tapestry. Orsina managed to catch her breath well enough to say, "Can I ask what happened to you?"

Artemio seemed to consider her for a moment. "You can ask, but I'm not certain I trust you enough to answer."

Orsina felt like she'd been slapped in the face. After everything that had happened, how could he say such a thing? Her mouth fought her as she mumbled. "You don't trust me?"

He cast her a scowl that softened at the look of dismay on her face. But he still did not tell her what had happened to him. Rather he drew her closer into his confidence as they walked. "At this juncture I trust nobody. The enemy had a Shadebound among them, they were mostly commoners. Thus the logical conclusion would be for the Shadebound to be a commoner also, except of course that such a thing does not exist, or at least did not exist until such time as we encountered you, conveniently, right at the height of the murderous spree."

Orsina may have been quick on the uptake, but this kind of paranoia escaped her usual ability to follow things through. It was like his thinking had been twisted by too much time in this maze of confusion. Still she felt genuinely hurt to hear that her most trusted friends in this world thought so little of her. "You think I'm your enemy?"

"I think that you are suspiciously convenient, showing up at just the right juncture, and falling right into my lap, to convince me that a Shadebound need not be of noble lineage." An edge had begun to creep into his voice. Not the pain that dogged his every step or the anger at being deceived. A hunger, like he was coming closer and closer to the truth of things, and his appetite had been whetted.

"I've never been anywhere near your lap." She said too loudly. Dropping her voice with an anxious glance about. "And nobody sent me. I came to Covotana because I had to."

"Because your powers just so happened to emerge at this exact moment in history. Because your Arazi huntsman just happened to be heading this way." His eyes were narrowed, and Orsina didn't know how to pry them open again, how to make him see who she really was. "There is entirely too much convenience at work here."

"Kagan was... he was the only one who could bring me. He was the only one I had."

Artemio turned on her and the rapid twist of his torso drew out a pained gasp. "Then how is it that you have not spoken of him?"

"Because... I had to come because... I had to use my shade. I nearly died, then I used it. I used it, then I couldn't control it." Her voice trailed off to a whisper. "It nearly ate me up."

He didn't look even a little impressed. "And you did not speak of your exile friend because?"

"Because I thought he'd left. I thought he'd gone the first night he brought me here, back to his life in the woods. Back to someplace he could be safe, and peaceful. I never spoke about him because I thought that he was gone and he was never coming back. Because I thought my whole life was over, and there was just this..." She cast her hands about her with despair written in every line of her face. As if the luxury of the palace was the worst punishment that she could conceive of. "I didn't talk about him, because I thought that if I didn't say anything, people would just leave him alone, like he wants."

He had to stop and catch his breath again. "None of us get what we want, all that we get is to serve to the limit of our abilities then break upon the rocks of failure."

“Are you...” She did not mean to reach for him, she did not mean to lift him up from the wall, she didn’t mean to feel the muscles shifting beneath his shirt, or the tremors passing through him as he fought off the pain. “Did you... fail?”

He closed his eyes. There were wrinkles around them that Orsina did not recall from the day before. Strands of grey amidst the red of his hair. More than anything else, he looked older because he looked so very exhausted with life. “Not yet, but I am... I’m close.”

She wet her lips. “And Harmony?”

“She’s resting.” He finally accepted her arm about his back, falling into step with her. Accepting her help. “I’m meant to be too, but I promised your Kagan I’d speak for him.”

“And you keep your promises, even when you’re falling to pieces.”

He laughed, but it set off a rattle in his chest that Orsina did not like to hear. “That I do.”

“Take me back to wherever you’re holed up, let’s see what the hurt is, and what we can be doing to fix it.” She could hear Mother Vinegar in her voice. The command and contempt she used to make grown men strip to the nude and rub on whatever foul mixture she prescribed them.

Orsina was practically carrying him by this point, but still he made an attempt to regain some control over the situation. “And how do I know that this is not some conniving attempt to poison us?”

She smiled to him then, but it was not the charming, open expression of the country bumpkin that he’d come to associate with her. It was a smirk. “I already told you, I need your help.”