

**First Class Citizen**  
***Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

The Prima was awaiting her waking, but still Orsina struggled to pull herself up from the comfortable darkness. It did not hurt down here. She was not struggling and striving to be someone that she was not in her dreams. In her dreams she spread her wings and soared across the steppes, everything was her domain, everything was her prey. There was no fear or confusion, only hunger.

When the old woman had grown tired of waiting, she jabbed Orsina with a finger. Right in the ribs. That got her out of her stupor fast. "Ow."

"Nice of you to join us."

They were in an unfamiliar room, and she was draped on an unfamiliar piece of furniture, something like the cushioned seats she'd seen in Harmony's room but stretched out like a bed. "What happened?"

The Prima was settled on a little footrest by her side with all the dignity one could muster in such a situation. She kept her knees together and her face turned down towards the fireplace. "Well my dear, it seems that I am owe you something of an apology."

"You don't need to do that." Orsina mumbled, still less than entirely aware of what was going on around her. "You've done so much already..."

"Hush my dear, I apologise to you because I did not believe you when first you arrived. All of your instructors to date have praised your gifts, praised the nobility that had to run in your blood. I too was taken in. I truly believed that you were merely ashamed of the circumstances of your birth, or unfortunate and abandoned. I thought that the truth would out once the great shades pried your mind open." Her shoulders slumped, and for the briefest of moments she actually looked her age. "It seems that the truth has outed in a most fearsome manner. You truly do not recall any hint of aristocratic blood in your lineage, even in those parts of your mind that you cannot reach. Guscio Cavo looked within you and found you to be all that you have said that you are and nothing more."

Memories were creeping back to Orsina now. Frightening memories. "He attacked me. He called me a peasant."

The Prima sighed. "Cavo is a spirit of order as much as of war. Disciplined but inflexible. It would not tolerate your touch. It would not submit to you."

"I noticed that too."

A little smile quirked the side of the woman's face, but she smoothed it back to pity in no time at all. "It was not your fault. It was simply the nature of the shade."

Orsina could not contain her shudder as the memory crept back in. This must have been how normal people saw shades, unstoppable, colossal, terrifying. "Doesn't help me though."

Silence hung over them for a time as Orsina shifted from lounging to something like sitting with a shifting weight in her gut making her pause every time that she tried to rise. When she finally gave up on

further progress, the Prima was still staring at her. Orsina shifted a little more, uncomfortable at the attention. The older woman sighed, "I must admit that this possibility had never occurred to me."

Meanwhile, Orsina's mind had turned from the past to the immediate future. "Does everyone know now? Do they all know what I am? Do I have to go?"

"No, my dear. They most certainly do not. What we hear of a shade's thoughts are for us alone. You knew of Cavo's complaint because you were connected, I learned of the complaint I when I mounted him to drive him off you, but the others... they have no idea. They merely think you made a catastrophic error somewhere in your negotiations."

"They aren't totally wrong." Orsina tried to laugh but it came out choked.

The Prima waved her hand. "None of this is my concern. The real worry to spring from all of this is that there are combatant shades known to the House, and as a rule our graduating students make a short pilgrimage to claim one. Typically from the site of some ancient battle where the shade's legend grew. However, these shades shall all be of noble birth. Invariably. And most, if not all, will share the attitude of Cavo."

"So... I'll just never have a combat shade?" This might all be a blessing in disguise. If she had no combat shade, they couldn't make her fight, could they? She wouldn't have to be a soldier for Espher if she couldn't even swing a sword better than the average man on the street. This might be her salvation.

If the Prima saw the hint of relief in Orsina's features, she gave it no heed. "And you shall never graduate."

That was sufficient to blot out the glimmer of relief swiftly. "What... what would that mean?"

"First and foremost it will mean that you are not bound to an impresario, permanently limiting your available power. In terms of prestige, it would mean that your value would be greatly diminished in the eyes of those who matter. It would mean that rather than being such a roaring success that all are clamouring for you and willing to overlook any haziness in your past, you would face a degree of scrutiny. Typically a mother will do the work of trying to forge a marriage, or some patron your adoption into a noble family as a ward, you lack the both of these to make arrangements for you, so you would be forced to... let us just say it will complicate matters for you considerably." Orsina had never seen it before but there was something in the slant of the Prima's shoulders that spoke to the immense burdens that she bore, the many plates that she kept spinning like a mummer at the summer fair, wobbling all around her. She looked tired.

So Orsina said what she thought she had to. Just as she'd been doing since she was first thrust into this strange new world. "I'll fix this."

"My dear, I do not know that there is anything to be fixed. You cannot change who you are, and it would seem that noble blood entered into your family line somewhere prior to the history you can recall, so it is not as though we might seek out an ancestor who might be inclined to favour you." Where usually the Prima spoke with a flourish, like she was reciting the lines from a play, tonight it seemed that all sense of theatricality had departed. Each word was chosen slowly and carefully, and doled out like Mother Vinegar might have tipped her tiny wooden spoon of foxglove milk into her heart soothing tincture. Like

she knew that a slip of the hand could spoil everything. Like she knew that too heavy a dose of this truth might kill.

Orsina's knees drew up against her chest, rucking up all the lace and layers about her legs. There had to be a way out of this. A way around it. "Might I think on this, Prima?"

"First I must have your word that you shall not attempt anything foolish, as you did with our resident Owl." The exhaustion that Orsina felt seemed to be contagious, for once more the Prima looked beyond tired, deep into the trench at the far side of sleeplessness that Orsina herself had only found on those nights on the road when the rain fell like hammers on her hood and it was better to trudge on than try to sleep.

"How did you..." She caught herself when her voice wavered. "Of course you knew."

"Expertise does tend to take longer than a single night to cultivate, my dear. Not to mention that you seemed quite dazed in my lecture. There is a reason that we learn things for ourselves. The perspective of others does not always lend itself to our situation. Our understanding of matters is not the same as another's, and to force the perspective of another upon ourselves can be jarring." A hand extended out towards Orsina and patted at her wrist. Comfort or affection, from one ill-used to doling such trivialities out.

"I felt like I couldn't think my own thoughts." Orsina felt it still. As she tried to put it into words. "Like the shape of them was wrong."

"Indeed, and I could have warned you that such a course of action would have led to this result if you had taken the time to consult with me, or indeed any member of the staff before diving directly into one of the most dangerous compacts that any shade binder can undertake." The patting on Orsina's wrist now took on a distinct slapping rhythm.

"I... I didn't want to let you down."

The Prima sat back with a sigh and just looked at her for a moment. "My dear girl, I have placed my bets, and where the cards fall is not a matter of sorrow or joy. I was aware that there would be risks when I took you in, just as I was aware of the potential rewards. In terms that a farmer's daughter might best understand; you need not worry about my emotions, for I assure you a lifetime in court has left that particular field fallow."

Orsina dared to risk a gentle smile. "You leave a field fallow so that it blooms better the next season."

The Prima did not smile back. "Then perhaps I should have said barren."

"I like fallow better. Mean's there is hope for something new coming back."

"Now to the other matter, I must ask that you do not attempt to bind any more shades until you are sufficiently prepared to partition their access to you. It is a more advanced class that I can see you'll need to progress to with all immediacy, given that you already have two powerful shades in your coterie. It isn't unheard of, of course. There are some who have been in private tuition all their life to inherit their family's shades but I must confess that in this as in all things you continue to surprise me."

Orsina stared at her blankly. "What?"

“When a binder possesses multiple shades, but is not yet bound to an impresario in turn, the increased drain upon our lifeforce in the short-term can be a devastating shock, many have died attempting to do too much too swiftly. It is for this reason that the shades must be carefully partitioned from each other, so that when one is being succoured, the others cannot attempt to drink also. It will all be demonstrated for you in your lessons, you need not fear.”

“No, I mean. I don’t have two shades.”

The Prima’s finely plucked brows drew down. “I’m not certain why you are attempting such a clumsy deception. You cast three shadows, my dear.”

“But I never... I didn’t...” Her mind began spinning again. Between the Owl’s memories and her own confusion regarding the bond she’d forged with Ginny Greenteeth, she had no idea of where another shade could have come from. She reached out tentatively, only to find her senses scrubbed raw after contact with the snooty armour shade. It had never hurt to reach out beyond herself before. She wondered if this was the kind of damage that the Prima was warning her of.

For her part the Prima looked increasingly concerned. “You didn’t know? You genuinely didn’t know? That is... concerning. It speaks to the very lack of training that we have already discussed. It suggests that there is no partitioning to speak of within your mind and spirit to keep the greater shades from feeding upon the energy of the lesser, or from touching on your mind without your awareness.”

“What... what do I do? How do I get rid of it.”

“The pact is already sealed, my dear girl. There is nothing to be done other than to find a use for this mysterious stowaway of yours. As your education progresses and you learn to construct such constraints within yourself as to allow control over each shade independently, we can hope that this hidden one might be drawn up to the surface, sifted from the masking presence of the others as gold is drawn from sand.”

What little conversation as could politely pass between two people of such vastly different station in life seemed to have been tapped out after that. The Prima returned to her desk, Orsina gathered her wits and some measure of strength back to her limbs and she set out into the dark corridors of the House of Seven Shadows.

Before all of this had happened, her mind was in flux, overwhelmed by all that she had taken in, but now that her very spirit was ringing like a gong, she felt as though she were lost in her own body. It had been a feeling building up since the dragon in the forest, when she woke up a year older and she didn’t know her own face. It grew worse every day that she was here. Her body was different. Her life was different. Everything was changing and she just had to play along. Now her mind was different too, in her panic, she’d mangled it. She’d crammed a lifetime of learning into her empty head and now it threatened to squeeze all her own thoughts out through her ears. She couldn’t stand it. She couldn’t think. The damned suit of empty armour had struck her so hard that she could feel her bones quaking within her. Bones that weren’t hers, had been pushed inside her flesh, stretching her out of shape. Twisting her into this new Orsina. This girl who’d do anything to graduate from some school she’d never heard of. To make herself powerful, so that somebody might give her shelter from the world.

She didn't want that. She'd never wanted any of that. These were the wants of the Prima and Harmony. They were in her head, speaking in her voice. Telling her how she should live. Who she should strive to become. She needed to think. She needed to get her brain back under control. She was spiralling. She was losing herself.

Her body was a stranger's. Her mind was a stranger's. She was dressed up like some fairy-tale princess. She had a library crammed between her ears. She didn't even own her own soul anymore. There was something else inside her. Lurking in the hollow in her heart. Some stranger, some monster, that had snuck its way in while she was insensible. What shade had tied its fate to hers? When would it have had the chance when she had her walls built high and never lowered them.

Everything that she was, was gone. Would anyone even recognise her now? If Mother Vinegar set eyes on her, would she be known? Kagan? Anyone?

She staggered from wall to banister as she came down the stairs from the Prima's tower. The blindfolded servants the only ones about in the dead of night heard her, but did not see her. Did not know her. They wouldn't dare to challenge if she was meant to be here. How dare they, they were commoners. Peasants.

She was a peasant too. She had looked at these noble scions of the most powerful families in all the land and she had thought the same way. How dare she challenge what they said was best for her? How dare she consider arguing back?

As she tried to think of the layout of the House and find her way, she kept on colliding with memories that didn't belong to her. Here there was once a door. There a runner carpet once covered the floorboards. Out in the main chamber of the house she could look down and see the moonlight reflecting in the water. Some hint of reality creeping back in from outside all this madness.

The moon still rose. The sun still shone. The world cared nothing for the things she did or the places she went or even for the damage she dealt to herself in pursuit of someone else's dreams. It was enough to still her for a moment. To quiet the shades prying at her from all around, inside and out.

Was she still her mother's daughter, or had they made her something else? Was she still the girl who strode undaunted through a forest where grown men feared to tread? She didn't know. It certainly didn't feel like her mind was the same, nor like it would ever return to the way that it had been. In her desperation, she truly feared that she'd maimed herself.

Memories that weren't her own bombarded her every staggering step, but her own were the anchor that held her in place. Mother Vinegar grinding roots in a pestle. Kagan's bark of laughter when he found a gnawed clean claw in one of his snares. The little woodland drake he was stalking had chewed right through its own flesh to be free. Scales and cracked teeth lay scattered around it. A blood trail led off into a stream, then vanished on the well washed stones. "Let it go," He'd said. It had earned its freedom.

It had maimed itself for survival, and he had not judged it foolish, just determined. Brave beyond the limits of reason. Such things were rarely praised among the nobility of Espher, who thought more in terms of calculated odds, but among the Arazi what she had done would have been akin to a holy act. Even a crestfallen exile like Kagan showed what scars he could with pride.

In the deep shadowed night of the unlit halls, she found her way to Harmony's chambers more by luck than any real memory of the way. She flung the door open to more desolate silence.

The fireplace was unlit, the disarray of books that usually signalled Artemio's presence was absent and the perfumes and oils that Orsina could have sworn that she'd never noticed Harmony wearing had dissipated to a dull hint. Like the scent of a candle blown out hours ago.

Her only friends in this strange new world were gone. Vanished in the night. She supposed that she could go charging around, barking at servants for answers and demanding their return like a spoiled toddler upending a house in the hunt for a lost rag-doll, but as she slipped into the stillness of the room she realised that what little strength she'd managed to gather on the Prima's fainting couch had now been spent. Harmony was meant to be there, to catch her when she fell. Artemio was meant to be there, in the background, tutting and clucking like a mother hen. Instead there was just this empty room again, where she'd curled around herself and patched her wounds the last time that injury was done to her. It seemed that this was to be the only constant in this new life, suffering alone.

With a kick of her heel, she slammed the door shut behind her. If this was to be her life, then she would survive it.