

**The Last Word**  
***Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

Between bed-rest and carriage rides, Harmony was stiff and slow. Her latest cut had been slow to heal and even now it seemed to drag at her as she went through her routine. It was early in the morning, by the standards of Covotana, and earlier still by the standards of the students of the House of Seven Shadows.

This was the second dawn she'd awoken back here, someplace that felt safe, like a home should. So it was time for her to return to her routine, to work some life back into her body so that she might fulfil her duty and keep Art safe. Dawn had risen as she made her way across the grounds, and the dew was dry by the time she reached the sand by the rear wall. She'd been right to come early. The summer's heat would make this a torture if she stayed out too long.

For a time, she could forget everything. The cavern beneath the city. The doom that was waiting for them. The problem of Orsina, and the way that her brother now stared at the girl who'd saved her life when she was not looking. If it had been lust, that could have been cultivated into something that would serve all their needs well, but for the longest time all that Harmony had seen was focused interest. Like the common girl was a problem to be solved. It was only last night she'd finally deciphered the look in its entirety, when she saw him turning away when Orsina turned, to avoid her noticing his observation. It was suspicion.

His chain of logic was easy enough to follow from there. He thought the Last King was Shadebound, this was a peasant uprising, where had he seen a peasant Shadebound? Only here, right in plain sight, slipping into easy striking distance by infatuating his own sister. Clearing up loose ends by killing her own failed assassin to gain his admiration and trust. It was a tidy explanation that would appeal to his love of puzzles, but the real world was not a tidy place. Sometimes things happened without reason. Sometimes people existed without some place in the grand schemes of the powerful.

She froze in the midst of her routine, feeling eyes upon her, and she spun, ready to be beset by robed rebels all over again, just as she had been so many times in her dreams since their journey through the sewers.

It was Orsina. Drawn out of her slumber and down here to Harmony's sanctuary. She wore Artemio's shirt and trousers, cinched at the waist by a belt that was unfamiliar, and a pair of high boots that Harmony felt certain had not come from his wardrobe either. Last time they had been here, Orsina had looked awkward and gawky in the clothes, now they hung on her like they'd been tailored to fit and she carried herself with an easy grace that seemed almost as alien. The smile was her old one though, warm and open. "Good morning."

Despite herself, despite all that had been running through her mind, and that sinking feeling in her stomach that it would only make sense for her only friend in the world to be using her to get at Art, Harmony smiled right back at her. "And what has stirred the sleeper from her rest before the breakfast bell has even been rung?"

"I figured you'd be down here." Orsina shrugged, still coming closer, coming onto the sand. "Needed a chance to talk with you."

With a smile, Harmony slashed her sword through the air between them. "To talk, or to converse? I still have not finished my training for the day."

Orsina smiled too, reaching behind her back to draw out the pair of rice-sickles they'd found amongst the discarded weaponry of the House's armoury. Old abandoned relics, now given new life. "Can't see a good reason it can't be both."

With a little bow of their heads, they began. Harmony's blade darted out, but Orsina had not even flinched at the feint. Perhaps she was tapping into the skills of Rossi, but Harmony could see no sign. Only the firm line that had been a smile, quirking up a little at the corners. Confidence. "Good morning, Orsina. How can I help you today?"

"Good morning, Harmony." She sprung forward, sweeping both sickles down, not so much to stab Harmony, as to force her to raise her blade and catch them, bringing their faces close enough together that they could speak softly. "I wonder if you might know what I've done to offend your brother?"

Artemio. Again. As though all the world spun about him. She kicked out at Orsina, hauling up with her blade to keep her from disentangling herself. The kick made contact with the girl's hip, but it was only a brush. Orsina had simply surrendered her weapons. The jerk of the sword had flung them into the air. "Perhaps he is a little put out at the fact you mean to graduate from the house alongside him this year, having barely arrived a few months ago."

Orsina's eyes darted from Harmony to the sky and back and then her hands darted out to snatch the spinning sickles by their handles and fend off the next thrust. "I can't apologise for being good at the thing I'm meant to be good at. That wasn't how you taught me."

It was exactly what Harmony had taught her, to hold herself up and never let others tear her down. It was just strange to hear that she had taken the lesson to heart instead of merely nodding along with whatever her supposed mentor said. The pause of realisation gave Orsina her opening, she leapt back in, leading with one sickle, then spinning the other up from the opposite side, forcing Harmony to flick back and forth to keep them at bay. This was proving to be a better workout than anticipated, and still the girl showed no sign of calling upon her shade to improve upon her skills. This was all Orsina. It was hard to believe.

"And have you given any thought to who you mean to make your Impresario upon your graduation?" Harmony blurted out as she bounded back out of reach. The sickles combined with Orsina's shorter arms gave her the advantage so long as they kept their distance. "I know that the Prima must have squirrelled you away and offered up a selection of viable candidates by now."

The look that crossed Orsina's face was pure revulsion. It would have made Harmony laugh aloud if it hadn't been the distraction she'd been waiting for. Driving in at Orsina, she tested her defences. Making her move, making her sweat, bringing her breath fast as she answered. "She was treating it like she was arranging a marriage."

Two weapons gave her more options, but it also gave her twice the problems to contend with. Orsina had to work out where to put both of her hands while Harmony's motions were fluid and natural. She

was one with her blade. Training had shriven any thought from fighting now. It gave her room enough to think, to push at the conversation as well as the weapons. "Closer than a marriage surely, with a marriage death might someday part you. With the bond, there is no such distinction."

"I don't want to marry a stranger." The smile had faded from Orsina's face, and while Harmony would have liked to have thought it was because her limits were being pushed, she knew that in truth it was just this troublesome topic of conversation once more.

Harmony struck with words and blade in harmony. Batting aside Orsina's defences with a fearsome flurry of blows. Trying to drive out her sickles and leave her body open to a strike. "What has want to do with such matters? You know you must wed for position and power. Indeed, this may be a chance for you to tie two families into your protection. Select a groom from one and an Impresario from another and you might even cement an alliance. If they're all clamouring for you so much that the Prima has to serve as matchmaker."

Orsina did not stand still and take the abuse. When it seemed one of her sickles was driven out too far, she spun to bring it around from the other side, ducking Harmony's half-hearted thrust at her back and coming up with the momentum to hook the next thrust aside. "How am I meant to trust somebody I've never met with my life?"

"They're all of good breeding surely, isn't that enough?" On the back foot and being pressed once more by the spinning weapons sweeping back and forth at her, Harmony tried for another verbal jab.

"Not for me."

There had not been a moment's falter. It seemed that Orsina was learning how to keep her focus. "Well what would be your preference then? Who do you count as a friend who could be trusted with your life?"

Another springing leap stole Harmony's advantage of reach, once more both blades hooked over the top of her sword, but this time, Orsina pulled down on it hard so that the same kick would not leave her open. She was learning. It brought them nose to nose, both wrestling. Harmony's trained arms against Orsina's peasant stock musculature. She looked into Harmony's eyes, and she breathed out, "You."

Feeling sweat beading on her forehead and her arms beginning to ache, Harmony twisted her sword aside, setting the sickles screeching along its length and throwing off sparks. "I am sworn to my brother already, you know this."

Still Orsina spoke softly, even now they'd sprung apart. "I know."

The heat in her cheeks had not departed. Harmony had to concentrate to keep her breathing steady. They trod dangerous ground here, whether the other woman recognised it or not. She had to choose her words with care. "Whatever affection I might bear for you, you must know that a bond such as this, it cannot be."

"I know." Her answer seemed to come even softer, even more distant. Harmony could not bear it. Could not bear the softness of her sorrow.

She rushed in, slashing and stabbing with disregard for her own defence. Driving the other girl back a step before she fell into the rhythm of defence. Her parries flowing from one to the next, coming closer

and closer with each impact to hooking the rapier and dragging it off course. And so Harmony pressed on ever harder. Intent on barrelling through this conversation and to the other side. She thought for one wonderous moment that she'd knocked a sickle from Orsina's grip, but it tumbled through the air just long enough for the girl to snatch it up again in a reverse grip, handle still grasped in her hand but the blade angled forward.

When next she parried, both hands rushed together, like a beast snapping shut its mighty jaws. The blade on top caught on Harmony's slash, dragging it down and the other shot up past it, until the tip was brushing against the ties that kept her shirt closed.

Her heart pounded beneath the tip of that blade.

Stepping back, Harmony conceded the loss. Bowing her head. Anger beginning to prickle at her. This peasant who had been nobody could not beat her, not if she wasn't so damnably distracted by the conversation.

Orsina stepped back too, a flush on her cheeks and her confident smile returning. It was real anger now. The same anger she'd imagined Art felt at the prospect of graduating alongside a girl so many years his junior, who had come and surpassed even his great talents in so short a time.

She needed to pierce that smugness. Cut through all the distractions that Orsina presented. Once more, she was the aggressor, leaping forward to strike at Orsina with the same pattern of blows that had almost broken through in their last bout. "If you know that you cannot have that, then what do you want from me Orsina?"

This time, the girl seemed to recognise the pattern. She was not pressed and she did not struggle, she drove her sickle blades into the heart of the storm of steel and dragged it out until it spun harmlessly about her. With a huff of air, she stepped in closer, punctuating each word with a swipe that Harmony had to dance out of reach of, lest she be parted from her innards. "Friendship? Advice?"

"What should I tell you as your friend?" Harmony let out a bitter laugh. "Marry a rich and powerful man, have many magical babies and watch them rule the world in your stead. Set aside all hopes and dreams you might have had of a life of your own and give yourself over to bolstering his ambitions. It is a woman's place in the world, is it not?"

"If I was in my place, I'd be using these to plant rice." She spun the sickles, then life seemed to return to her in a rush. She moved in again with such haste that Harmony could not have countenanced it. Blades spinning about her like she was that cone of wind where she'd snatched up her combat shade. She chased Harmony about the sand, never quite catching up to her, but never quite slipping back far enough for her friend to relax.

So Harmony did not. She slashed at her feet, at her face, places where her training had never taught her to go. She turned a blow with the guard of her sword and punched out with the hand that held it to force Orsina off balance. "Then what do you want? If you could cast aside all order and choose your own path, where would you go? What would you do?"

"I don't know." Orsina fell back under this new assault, but she did not slow, and as many strikes as she parried, she returned in kind. "I don't even know what my choices are."

“So you know what you do not want, but not what you do. You know that you’d reject the path that every one of us has to walk, but not where you’d go instead.”

She landed another kick, not on Orsina’s hip but on the inside of her knee, knocking her stance askew and buying her enough time to slap the inside of a wrist with the flat of her blade before she had to switch it back over to catch the other sickle’s descent.

“I don’t want to hurt anyone.” Orsina sounded close to tears, though none of it showed on her placid face. “I don’t want to fight...”

Harmony thrust right for Orsina’s heart right then, anger winning out over reason. If this had been the Orsina she first met, she’d be dead. Instead the one sickle in her hand caught the thrust, twisted it aside and let the momentum spin her. “Then what are you doing here? Why have you got a weapons in your hand? Why have you got a killer in your soul? What was the point of it all if you’re just going to run and hide?”

The momentum had flowed into a kick, and it was only when Orsina froze with her leg still raised that Harmony deigned to look down. The dropped sickle had landed with the blunted outer edge down on the top of her boot. The movement of the kick had kept it in place, until now, when it came to rest, tip first, upon Harmony’s side. With a grunt of dismay, the two of them parted, and the sickle fell harmlessly to the ground between them. “I needed to...” Orsina bent to pick up her dropped weapon with a sigh. “I needed to get stronger.”

“Why?” Harmony swung for her while she was still down on one knee, and it was only some instinct that neither of them knew that she had that saved Orsina from a slice across her scalp. Both sickles came up to meet the glancing blow, to hook over the sword and drive it down into the ground, leaning hard on it to keep it pinned down as she rose to her feet.

“To keep you safe.” There was a flicker of shadow beneath Orsina as she leapt, one foot spinning over Harmony’s blade in a graceful cartwheel and the other lashing out at her face.

“To keep me safe.” Harmony barely managed to jerk her head aside, but she had to give up ground to do it. Still Orsina didn’t stop. Another flicker of the shade being channelled, then another impossible springing leap, both sickles coming down to catch on either side of the rapier blade Harmony had held out to skewer her in flight. Twisting it aside, yanking it from Harmony’s grip. Disarming her entirely. Harmony had never been so thoroughly bested and she could feel the shame of it burn.

For her part, Orsina seemed to barely notice at all that she’d bested her best friend. She merely stepped back a distance, to show Harmony that she was free and safe to retrieve her fallen sword. “The whole world might turn on me in a moment if they ever found out who I really am. If this is the only way I can keep myself safe then I need it.”

Harmony silent fumed as she retrieved her weapon and assumed her position opposite the girl on the sand, she’d been treating Orsina as if she were only herself, but all of this time, she had been tapping into the skills of Rossi, right under her nose. Calling and dismissing him moment to moment as she needed him. It was something that Harmony had never seen done. Something she didn’t know could be done.

“So you’ll fight for yourself, but not for anyone else?” Harmony may not have been able to best Rossi in a fight, but she could certainly distract Orsina too much to use him. “How uncharacteristically selfish of you.”

When she crept back in to make her first few nervous looking swipes, it was clearly Orsina back in complete control of her body. That her mind was affixed on the question instead of the fight. Perfect. “How is it selfish to not want to hurt anyone?”

The tepid assault was slapped aside, Harmony’s blade darting in to press Orsina back. “And what of all of the people that the ones you let walk free will hurt?”

Both sickles swept by Harmony’s face, pushing her off balance, but she was not giving up her footing this time. She twisted back and lashed out with her blade in the same motion, almost scoring a hit on Orsina before her own momentum carried her spinning out of reach.

Still the peasant was giving the fight too much attention. Harmony had to twist the knife. “If you had not fought back when that girl came for me, I’d be dead. Would that weigh less heavily on your conscience?”

That most certainly did the trick. Orsina stumbled as she found her footing, and all at once the flow of the battle changed direction. Harmony had the upper hand again, she could glance a blow off Orsina’s sickles and halt their progress, she could lash out with foot and fist and drive her opponent back when she drew to close, it was as though all that she had been holding back now came loose.

Harmony’s blade came within an inch of Orsina’s fresh scarred cheek before she mustered an answer. “That’s not the same.”

It was barely an answer at all. Harmony pressed her attack, turning that thrust that had gone wide into a slash that Orsina had to duck to avoid, costing her mobility when the next thrust came and she barely managed to intercept it. Still Harmony pressed, “What if it was Art? What if he was lying there sleeping and some assassin came for him with a knife, would you just watch?”

Orsina’s face was always so open, even before the shade had tried to open it further. Every thought in her head seemed to be on display. It almost looked like grief when Harmony had said that. She stumbled backwards towards the edge of their little arena, barely managing to keep up with the steady pattern of parries and strikes. “No. Of course not.”

“The Prima, would you let her die?” Harmony thrust at Orsina’s heart.

“Your fairy-tale witch?” Another thrust, coming even closer before the blunted outer edge of a sickle punched it aside.

Harmony snarled and hammered the final strike home. “Your lizard man?”

Orsina’s sickles crossed around the blade and locked it still just a few inches from where her breast heaved. She didn’t sound breathless when she looked up into Harmony’s eyes. She looked determined. “I’d protect them.”

Harmony had to haul with all her might to get the rapier free, and even though she managed, it showered sparks onto the sand. Orsina's next swing slapped it aside, and she took a step forward. Harmony tried to throw her off again. "The people in your classes, the people from your village?"

Harmony's next parry was picture perfect, like the book on swordplay that Art had dug out of the family library when she was too young to read. Angled to deflect Orsina's strike aside while putting her own weapon in prime position to strike back. She was doing everything right, but it didn't matter in the face of Orsina's newfound focus. The second sickle hooked her blade and dragged her open to the kick that followed. It tapped Harmony on the hip instead of taking her full on in the gut, but it hurt, and it broke her stance. Orsina's voice came like a growl now. "I'd protect them all if I could."

With every word, Harmony rained a new blow down on Orsina, once more giving herself over entirely to offence, relying on the speed of her strikes to keep the girl off balance. "When an army marches over Espher's border intent on waging war, do you suppose that they'd leave any of us intact and unharmed? You have power, real power. If you don't use it, that's as good as giving us over to the ones who'd see us all dead." She let a sickle breeze by her upturned chin then hammered at Orsina's arm with her hilt, drawing out a yelp of pain. "You'd be better to kill us yourself. At least it would be quick."

Orsina let her guard drop, backing away from her with all haste. She looked another few words from tears. "Where is all this coming from?"

"Before, I wanted you to stay, because I thought it would keep you safe, but then I saw you out there with the shades. I saw what you can do." Harmony snarled. "Anytime, you can just reach out and change the world. All you need to do is want to."

It took Harmony a moment to get her composure back. Then she asked simply, "So what do you want?"

She may not have had much advantage when it came to fighting the embodied spirit of a legendary master of combat, but when it came to talking to the lost girl before her, Harmony held all of the cards. She stepped in closer, expecting Orsina to burst back into motion, to put up a good fight despite all of her distraction, but instead her sickles still hung limply from her hands and she let out a sigh. It was going to be the easiest touch Harmony had ever scored.

Then Orsina asked. "What do you want?"

It halted Harmony in her tracks. It turned the smooth thrust that would have prodded into Orsina's stomach into a stuttering motion that Orsina was able to sidestep. She opened her mouth to answer, but with a flicker of shadows about her feet, Orsina launched into motion once more.

All sign of Orsina was gone as she moved. The tempest spun behind her eyes, and the sickles in her hands did things that Harmony could not have guessed were possible. Sweeping through patterns of attack and defence so seamlessly that it seemed she had more than just the two arms at her disposal. At one point a parry and strike came on with such speed that Harmony could have sworn the two sickle blades must have passed clean through one another to make it possible. She had no time to formulate a pretty answer, all of her attention was bound to this fight, to this moment. All the world faded away until nothing remained but the two of them, bodies and blades in fluid motion, dancing back and forth.

Then just as swiftly as Rossi had seized control he slipped away, and Orsina was herself again. Her motions still fluid and confident, but all of the implacable certainty of victory absent.

A half step and a twist was all it took to move out of the sickles reach so that they swept by her without scratching fabric. She gave her usual answer to such questions. "I want to keep my brother safe. I want to help him do all the amazing things he's sure to do."

"That's just what you were told to want." There was a hint of a smile cutting through Orsina's grief as she spun the conversation back around. Perhaps she wasn't so incompetent at this as Harmony had hoped. "A woman's place? Right?"

Each snapped phrase was accompanied by the same snap of scything blades. Knocking aside Harmony's guard. Driving her back. Driving her to her knees. Until Orsina was standing over her, sickle blades crossed beneath her neck and she had no clue as to how they had gotten there.

Looking down on her with such sorrow and pity on her face that it had Harmony close to weeping, Orsina asked, "What do you want?"

"I want you." The words slipped out unbidden as she looked up into the girl's eyes. Watching as they widened with surprise and confusion.

"You... what?"

With a shaking hand, Harmony reached up to push the sickles down, away from her unprotected throat. She did not need to. She knew that Orsina would never do anything to hurt her, as surely as she knew her own mind, but it gave her a moment to put her own thoughts into words. To place some padding between the raw heart of herself that she'd just exposed and the cold light of day. "I want to be with you, you're my dearest friend in all the world, and I want to keep you close and safe, and I have no clue as to how that might be done." She left her sword lying in the sand and reached out to Orsina, and was almost overwhelmed with relief when there was not a moment's hesitation from the girl in sheathing her sickles and catching Harmony's hand. She was drawn up until the two of them were eye to eye. She could have sworn that she was taller than Orsina when she'd first arrived. She wet her lips and pressed on, "I thought if you married Artemio, that might keep you near to me, but with an Impresario to contend with too, I haven't a clue how to help." "If I could stand for you I would, you know I would, but Art, he has nobody else in the world. He wants nobody else in his world. It has to be me, or he'll never be whole. He'll never be a full-blooded Shadebound without someone to bond with."

Orsina stepped back from her now. Not because Harmony had so openly declared her love for her, but because it still wasn't enough. "So I just need to pick some stranger to share my soul with."

Just like that, all the tension fled Harmony. All of the suspicion and doubt about her friend's intentions had been worn away. This was all too intolerably serious. "Unless you've been hiding a secret lover beneath your skirts this whole time?"

No matter how deeply she was lost in thought, such scandalous words were enough to snatch a gasp from Orsina. "Harmony!"

"Oh don't be like that," Harmony leaned in closer and nudged Orsina's shoulder with hers, letting out a stage-whisper. "I thought you farm girls knew all about the wonders of coupling."

Orsina's face, which had remained its usual olive tone throughout almost every moment of their brutal sparring now flushed a bright red as she stuttered out. "I do not have, nor do I intend to take a... lover."



Harmony could not help herself. She had to lean in and press a kiss to the girl's cheek. To feel the emanating heat of that skin and know that she had caused it. So close, there was no need for brash talk, just a whisper. "What a pity."

Orsina still did not pull away. Harmony tried her best not to read too much into her stillness. She was uneducated in such matters after all. It did not mean anything that she still hung within the distance of a breath. It did not mean anything that her eyes had fluttered closed as though she were gathering her courage before asking, "Why? Did you have someone in mind?"

Harmony's will broke first. She could not bare herself so completely. She just couldn't. It was already unthinkable that she was entertaining thoughts of her friend, doubly unthinkable given Orsina's low birth, to speak them aloud, to let the girl know that she meant what she had said in play, it was intolerable. "I just don't think we should close ourselves off from new experiences."

The two of them parted, the tension broken, but Orsina did not wallow in her misery any more. Instead turning to this new light hearted tone as an escape from the serious debate of the past few minutes. "I've had rather enough new experiences for one lifetime. Perhaps that is what I want. To retire into quiet obscurity and have nothing new happen to me for the rest of my years."

Harmony chuckled. "I do not think that either of us should ever be so lucky. These are interesting times, after all."

Orsina turned to face her with a smile, her next quip already rising. Harmony would never hear exactly what it was that she meant to say, because the smile vanished and the flush drained from her as though she were being bled out. She whimpered, "No."

Behind her, Harmony heard the beating of some great skin drum. In confusion, she looked south over the city wall to discern what festivities could be making such a noise.

The dragon hung in the air above the wall, suspended like a marionette on invisible strings. Colossal and monstrous. Scales ridged with barbed bones and wreathed in a hazy halo as heat rose off it. Hot enough that the mirage shimmer ensconced it even at midsummer.

When it stretched its jaws wide, the fire came. Not like a spray as Harmony had imagined, but like a dam had burst its banks. Pouring down into the city. Flames roaring almost loud enough to conceal the screams.

When she turned back. Orsina had abandoned her.