

**Trial by Ordeal**  
***Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

If she looked back, she would break and run. All of her life was there behind her. Everything that she knew and loved. Even if she wanted to, she could not think about it. There were tests ahead, and not just the ones that this old woman had planned. It felt like the two of them were speaking in a different language from one another, even though they used the same words, the same inflections, everything meant something different.

When the woman the servants called “Prima” asked about family, it was like she was one of the shepherds trying to work out what Orsina’s wool would be worth at market. When she asked about the journey, she had expected a list of towns, inns and houses where Orsina had been made a guest. Not stories of rain and forests and sleeping in barns. Despite her age, the Prima’s face bore few of the marks of time. Yet every time Orsina answered one of her questions as fully and politely as she could, a little wrinkle appeared between the old woman’s eyes. She was getting it all wrong somehow. Her answers grew shorter and shorter, until she was barely saying enough to answer at all. Always Mother Vinegar had told her that she talked too much, now she was paying the price. What would happen when they rejected her? Could she find her way back to the forest? Would the shades devour her as Mother Vinegar had said?

She was shaken from her reverie at the sight of the entrance ahead. Everywhere in the city there had been the same pale wood, yellow-orange even in the dim light that filtered down from on high. Yet these looming doors would not have looked out of place in the deep forest. Soot blackened and solid and above all, old.

The whole building felt old to Orsina, old the way that the Selvaggia had, or more properly, old the way that Ginny Greenteeth had. She stopped for a moment on the threshold. The House felt more solid than all the rest of the city. More real. The Prima was saying something, but Orsina couldn’t hear her over the echoing presence of the building before her. “Sorry, what was that?”

The same sly smile that had appeared on the Prima’s face down by the gates was back. “Is something occupying your thoughts, girl?”

Orsina blushed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get distracted. It is just. The building is...”

“Six great shades of power are bound within. That is what gives our House its name. The natural shadow is cast by the building itself, but the other six. They fill this place, as they would a shadebinder.” The Prima leaned in closer, her gaze scraping over Orsina’s face for any hint or clue. “Do you hear them, girl? Do they call to you?”

The first test came so swiftly that Orsina might not have even noticed it if not for the pressure of the Prima’s stare. She closed her eyes for a moment, wondering if she’d be turned away before she even got inside, then decided on honesty. She shook her head. “No. I can feel... something. But I don’t hear them.”

All that the Prima said in return was, “Curious.”

The servant that had accompanied them all the way along the path with his parasol held high over them and his back getting drenched by the rain was holding a long silk handkerchief out to her, but the Prima placed a hand on his wrist. "I don't believe that will be necessary."

He frowned under his own blindfold, but quietly obeyed, folding the handkerchief back up and tucking it back onto a shelf by the door. The Prima beckoned Orsina forward.

When she stepped over the threshold, it was like she'd stepped into a bubble of silence. All the chatter of the living fell away. She hadn't even realised how much it was weighing on her until it was gone. She smiled at the Prima and was quietly thrilled to receive one in return. "Those who lack our gift find themselves overwhelmed by the shades that reside here. The visions that are presented to them are... unsettling. Many lose their minds. Yet here you stand unbent and unbroken."

"So you believe me now?"

"My dear girl, I had no doubts." Once more the Prima reached out as if to put an arm around Orsina then rethought it. "This is simply the procedure that our new students must pass through."

Orsina's brows furrowed. "What if I'd heard them?"

"Then my dear, you would have been on par with the vast majority of the students when they first arrive, untrained and unprepared for the challenges that this place brings. If you could hear their voices, then you would still be vulnerable to them." They moved through the atrium and into the main part of the building, layers upon layers of balconies lined the floors above them while the central fountain cast a cloud of mist up towards the grand skylight atop the House. "From your Mistress' letter I am to understand that you have been taught to ward off such intrusions. I am pleased to find that there was no exaggeration."

"Mother Vinegar wouldn't..." Orsina paused, trying desperately to reframe her usual expletive riddled descriptions of the old woman as something that someone polite could swallow. "Getting praise from her is like wringing oil from an olive pip."

Another thin lipped smile. Like Orsina had let her down again but she was too polite to say anything. "Charming."

They moved on through the mists and down into a stairwell, rounding a wood panelled corner and unveiling just how little of the House could be seen from the surface. Just as there were tiered balconies stretching up to the roof of the building above, so too were there layers upon layers down here beneath the earth, carved into the bubbled volcanic earth and polished with centuries of footsteps until they were as smooth as marble, illuminated by a massive chandelier dangling down in a mirror position to the fountain above.

Orsina could not help but move over to the edge and look down. As above, so below. At the bottom of the building was a midnight dark pool where the skylight had been on the roof of the building above.

She jumped when the Prima spoke at her shoulder, "Residential suites are in the upper building, as are the halls where our theoretical lectures are conducted, but the practical exercises are best unobserved by outsiders." She smiled at Orsina's wide-eyed expression. "It is here that you will meet your real

teachers. The six shades bound here are as different from one another as they are powerful, as you learn to master them, so too shall you master your own gifts.”

It felt like something was expected of her, so Orsina did her best to sound confident, even as she came to realise just how thoroughly she was out of her depth. “Sounds easy enough.”

“Spoken with all the vigour and ignorance of youth. Do you know how many of our students graduate each year as masters? I can count them upon my own two hands this year.” The Prima strode off, shaking her head, and Orsina had to hustle after her or risk being left behind. “The majority of my students shall leave with little more control of their gifts than you have already exhibited in resisting the call of the shades.”

They rounded the corner at the end of the row and descended another stairwell, this one turning away from that central chamber and out along a corridor that could more rightly be called a tunnel. A tunnel carved through the solid stone in a perfect circle. Still the Prima chattered on as if there were nothing unusual about any of it, “It is... a disappointment to me, but far from a surprise. Make no mistake, your gift may be an innate birthright of those who should rule, but that does not mean that the path to control of it will be as simple. It requires work. Real, hard work. Something that I find the spoiled children of the great houses often flinch from. It is my hope that your unique circumstances might provide you with some measure of impetus.”

Orsina forced herself to ask, even though she could feel shame prickling at her cheeks. “Impetus?”

The Prima tittered. “Drive, my dear. Ambition. The desire to succeed and the will to pursue it. It is my hope that you are ready and willing to put in the work required to make something of yourself.”

Every step that they took seemed to draw sweat to Orsina’s brow now. As though they had been walking for hours instead of minutes. Some of it was the ever climbing temperature, but most of it was the effort that she had to exert just to hold back the pressure that seemed to have encircled her head. “Prima, where are we going?”

“You, my dear? You are going for a bath. While I am going to try to find something that will fit you among the clothing that has been abandoned here through the years.” She sighed and stopped dead. Spinning on a heel to face Orsina again for the first time since they’d delved beneath the earth. “If you wish to be accepted as a student in this institution, then you must appear to belong here. Your manners, your... brackish speech, these things we can train you out of, and they can be masked in the short term by isolation and silence, but your presentation; your dress and your... aroma... must be addressed at once.”

A splash of mud on her skirts had never troubled Orsina, but even she had to admit that her travelling clothes were in a fairly foul state after almost a full season of travel. “I’ve smelled better.”

The tight lipped smile returned once more. “One can only hope.”

There were dozens of doors on either side of the passage, every one of them unmarked but for the trail of wax from the candles burning on their lintels, how anyone navigated around the House of Seven Shadows was entirely beyond Orsina. At the end of the line, she was ushered through to another chamber of that same smooth black stone where the heat was almost unbearable and more steam filled

the air, leaving her almost blind but for the circular golden glow of candles somewhere further in. “I assume that you can bathe without assistance?”

“There are folks who can’t?!” Orsina’s jaw dropped.

“You would be surprised, my dear girl.” The door creaked shut, swollen with all the moisture in the air. “I shall return shortly.”

Then Orsina was alone with her thoughts. For the first time in as long as she could remember, she was alone. No strangers. No Mother Vinegar. No Kagan. Nobody but her. Her and the ache in her head. It must have been the steam, doing something to her head. Making it feel like some great beast was stepping on her skull. The only way out was through. She took careful steps forward into the steam, feeling her way with her boot-caps.

The bath sloped up out of the floor in a smooth curve, completely unlike the tin baths that she’d seen back in sheepshank. She could barely understand what she was feeling until her knees collided with the side and she dipped her hands into the water already standing in wait for her.

She leapt back with a cry, the heels of her palms already blossoming with blisters. The bathwater was scalding hot.

A simple mistake, exacerbated by the fog and her own muggy head. She grit her teeth through the pain and moved on. She’d had worse. Feeling around the room, she tried to find some font of cold water so that she could bring the heat down and came up with nothing. She returned to the bath at the centre of the room and felt around its sides, its upper edges. There had be a way to make it safe for human use. They wouldn’t just have a pool of scalding water down here with no purpose.

Orsina’s eyes narrowed. The Prima had not said that there was a single test before she’d be accepted as a student. She’d said tests. Plural. Once more she held out her hands towards the water, but this time, with painstaking effort, she crept backwards inside her own mind, inside her own space, withdrawing enough that whatever else might dwell here could be heard.

*“What little babe comes to dip their toes in my pond?”*

Ginny Greenteeth was there in an instant, pressing to get in again. To finish what it had started.

Orsina slammed her walls back up so fast that she almost missed the whispers echoing all around her. If she had thought that the Selvaggia was dense with shades, it could not compare to this place, a whole city thrived and died on the doorstep of the House of Seven Shadows, and every dying soul was beckoned here by the gathered shade-binders, whether on purpose as a part of their training, or as the natural result of any vacuum. Those that were bound and used served their purposes, those that did not, lingered. A cacophony of shades. More than Orsina had even known existed. They clamoured outside of her defences, desperate and fading. The Prima had promised her six shades, not six thousand. Six, no matter how powerful, might have been managed, but as it stood, Orsina would not even be able to hear them.

Still she felt more certain than ever that the water in this bath was kept to its scalding heat by some bound shade, and that mastering it was the key to this test. She was shaking. Whether from the effort of holding all the shades at bay, or the shock of hearing Greenteeth’s voice scraping over the inside of her

skull again. The shaking would not stop despite the blazing heat of the room. It would not stop, no matter how sternly Orsina impersonated Mother Vinegar's voice to herself, commanding an end to, "All that silliness, eh?"

How long would it take the Prima to fetch her some clothes? That was the deadline on this puzzle. Orsina forced down her defences and immediately tasted pond-water. Like Greenteeth had never left. She spat a mouthful of it up into the scalding bath with a whimper. "Go away. I don't want you."

*"How could we ignore such an offering? Come back to my pool, the water is lovely and cool".*

Orsina grit her teeth and pushed against the intruding shade, pushed the way that she had when old dead Perdita had lodged in her head by the graveside. It was enough to knock Greenteeth loose. If only for a moment. Enough that Orsina could reach out desperately for whatever else there was to find. Swarms of shades rushed in only to be batted aside, there was something bigger here. Something with enough life within it to burn this hot. The thing that had been crushing her head like a nut between stones since the moment she stepped foot in the House. She reached and she reached, and she could taste the brimstone of the shade, it was down beneath her feet, lurking in some hidden darkness beneath the foundations of this place. Down so far that even the many strata of floors down here couldn't come close to breaching it. In the heart of the dead volcano below the city. She coughed up another mouthful of swamp-water. *"Just a touch more, my little dove. Just a drop. For all the help we gave you. For all the times we didn't drown you in your sleep. A little gift."*

"Shut up." Orsina growled down into the water. "I'm not trying to talk to you."

*"The old spent cinder down beneath won't talk to you, it's sleeping. I'm here for you. I can give you what you need. All I ask in return is..."*

Orsina had to drag her voice back down from a bellow. Wouldn't do for the Prima to hear her talking to herself. "Everything. That's all you ask for. Everything. I'm not falling for it again. You'd drain me dry without a second thought. You're a monster."

*"When you drink, are you a monster for slaking your thirst?"* Orsina actually preferred when Greenteeth tried on her condescension than this wheedling. It set her teeth on edge.

This close to the water, the rising steam was reddening Orsina's skin, but she would not flinch. "Nobody dies when I drink."

*"When you eat. A belly full of meat. You say there's no death?"*

"You took more than I was willing to give." It sounded stupid even to Orsina's own ears. Like a child bleating that the world wasn't fair. Wasn't it true of every shade that they'd take all you let them? The only thing that Mother Vinegar had drilled into her about them from the start was that they'd drain anyone dry given the chance. It was the one truly reliable thing about them.

"Could you make this water cold?"

Greenteeth surged right in against the barriers. *"My waters are lovely and cool."* Orsina could feel them. Lapping at her toes. Creeping up her shins with a tickle.

From dry lips, she whispered, "What's the cost?"

There was movement all around her. The steam rolled and rippled as the shade that she'd carried with her all the way from the deep forest swished back and forth around the bath. Studying it. "*One hour of your time.*"

"A minute."

The full weight of Greenteeth's wrath struck her then, like dropping to the bottom of a chill lake from standing safely on the shore. Sudden. Shocking. Not enough to break through. Not nearly enough, especially when Orsina was already bracing for it. Greenteeth strained and pushed and lashed out with all the power it had at its disposal, then finally, it folded. "*A minute then.*"

It was harder than it should have been to let her walls down again. Hard to trust – not in the shade which was treacherous and mindless by nature – but in herself. Hard to believe that she would not be overwhelmed as she had been before. It was like stepping from a clifftop and hoping that before she hit the ground she would remember how to fly. She did it all the same.

The water was cold when Greenteeth dragged her hands down into it. Chill as the deep pool in the deep forest, so deep and dark you could sink down into it and never return to the surface, bones tangled down in the weeds. But the heat crept back. "*What is this trickery?*"

Orsina grinned, even as swamp-water washed out between her teeth. Gurgling and she laughed, "One minute, Ginny Greenteeth, and not a second more."

The water cooled, then heated, then cooled then heated. Over and over the two shades struggled with it. Competing to assert their nature on the pool of otherwise inert liquid. With all of its attention turned to the battle it took little more than a nudge for Orsina to dislodge Greenteeth from where it was nestled inside her.

The water pulsed from hot to cold, hot to cold, but now both sides in the clash were tiring. It could not reach the deep water chill or the roiling heat that both sides were reaching for. Orsina stripped out of her clothes, ignoring the crack of sweat and mud as she pulled them away. She did not look at herself, because every time she'd caught a glimpse of her own body since the last time Greenteeth rode her, she could not shake the feeling that it was not hers. Scrambling into the bath as fast as she could, she set to scrubbing. The water was hotter than she'd like, but it did not scald her now. It was the work of a few vigorous minutes until she felt like the worst of the filth was gone, and she was doing her best to untangle her hair when the door creaked back open.

The Prima stood framed in the doorway with that same thin-lipped smile fading from her face. In one hand she held a bar of soap, in the other, a dress worth more than the village Orsina had grown up in. "You..."

Orsina turned to look at her but said nothing. The steam that had filled the air was all but gone now, hanging in the vaulted ceiling like a cloud overhead, but doing nothing to obstruct their view of one another. The Prima crept closer, under the guise of passing the bar of soap. Her eyes were unfocused, her mind travelling elsewhere.

Eventually, with that same fine line between her brows, she took her place behind Orsina and began washing her hair, as though she were a servant. Orsina had not had her hair washed for her since she was barely old enough to walk. The experience was unsettling. When the Prima spoke, it was soft. "The

purpose of this exercise is to teach our new students how little they know. To show them that shades can effect the world in ways that they do not need to understand to respect. I have never seen any student... brute force their way to success in this exercise."

Orsina ducked her chin down to her chest. Shame flushing her cheeks as much as the rising heat. She felt every bit the scolded child. Her voice was like that of a child when she spoke. Small. Scared. "I didn't know what you wanted me to do."

The long silence that followed as the Prima worked soap suds into her hair was agony. But when the Prima spoke, it was not to condemn her. "What you have done here is impressive." Orsina let out the breath that she had been holding. Fresh ripples ran across the surface of the bathwater. The Prima tightened her grip in the girl's hair. "But it was also terribly dangerous. I can see now why you were sent to us. You must not spend your life so... frivolously. To cool bathwater, it is beneath a shade-binder to use their gifts for such things."

Orsina had tears in her eyes when she twisted around in the bath, her soaped hair falling limply from the Prima's hands. "It was a test to see if I could stay and learn here. That didn't seem like a waste. That seemed like the most important thing I'd ever done."

"And there it is, the drive." The Prima's face betrayed nothing. But the line between her brows was gone when she reached out and turned Orsina away once more. Resuming her work loosening the tangle of the girl's hair. "You must understand that there is a degree of risk involved here, for myself as well as you. If the other families of the other students learned that someone born to less than noble parentage were being trained here it might do irreparable harm to the reputation of this institution. I needed to know if you would be worth that danger."

Orsina spoke up with more confidence than she felt. "And?"

"You are."