

The Conversation of Nobility
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Harmony was entirely disappointed by Orsina. All of her life, as a pampered lady of leisure, she had been informed that the lower classes were violent vicious thugs, just desperate to lay hands upon their betters. Yet here Orsina was, gasping for breath, the wooden stave in her hands swaying hopelessly from side to side.

Not once had she made it past Harmony's guard, while her own bare arms and legs were already striped with bruises and she looked to be barely holding back tears. "Come on, hit me."

She tried, but it was so clumsy and obvious that Harmony didn't even need to raise her own stave to block it, just step around. "You can do better than that!"

"I can't!" Orsina tossed the stick aside in disgust, as she'd been longing to since they'd begun.

Harmony surged forward to scoop it up, to press it back into her hands. The girl would not accept it. "Of course you can. "

Orsina pushed her open palms against the stave being foisted upon her instead of grasping it and it tumbled to the sand between them once more. "No. I can't. You move. Or you hit me. Or... I can't."

"Just try again!"

"I've been trying all morning. I can't hit you. You win. Okay?" The tears hung in her eyes now. The kinship she thought she'd felt with this other girl chipped away by every whack and tap. "Whatever you're trying to prove. You proved it. You are better than me."

For the first time it seemed that one of her blows had struck home. The air was driven from Harmony's lungs in her surprise. She was so accustomed to this place as a sanctuary where she could let loose all the frustrations that the rest of the world foisted upon her that it did not cross her mind that it might mean anything less to anyone else. In an instant she had to replay the hour that they had spent since dawn, seeing things not through the rose-tinted memories of her own snatched moments crossing blades in the yard with her father's more rebellious retainers before Artemio's gift became apparent and her training became a matter of duty rather than her moment to shuck her responsibilities.

"I... I owe you an apology. It did not occur to me that this would not be... fun to you. I had thought that this might be a place where our differences would matter less, when it seems that the opposite is true."

There were benches set back from the sand, where observers might situate themselves during training sessions and exhibitions. Orsina slumped over to them, still damp-eyed, but no longer so full of frustration. The painful silence stretched on until Orsina's bluntness broke it apart once more. "How many years have you been learning to hit folk?"

It had never been put to Harmony like that before. The true meaning of all her training and art. The causing of harm and pain. At first it made her back stiffen, to see her joy made so starkly about the misery of others. Yet she had driven poor Orsina far from comfort this morning, and it only seemed fair to accept a step beyond her own view of things in turn. "All the years of my life, for as long as I can

recall. First for the joy of doing a thing it was not entirely right for a lady to be doing, then because it would be my duty to protect Artemio, a duty I took to heart."

"Farmers don't learn to hit folk, witches neither, I suppose." She leaned her head on Harmony's shoulder, and the tenderness of it, the forgiveness enclosed in so casual a gesture, almost brought tears to Harmony's eyes too. "I do remember being taught not to hit folk... even when they deserved it."

Harmony sniffed, to keep her own emotions from overrunning her composure. "A notion I'm afraid we may have to disabuse you of. While our fair gender might protect us from the depravities of duels and the like, I'm afraid that your own role here in the House of Seven Shadows shall place you in combat soon enough. For all that they behave like civilised folks and academics, the truth is that the military might of Espher is in her Shadebound, and if war should come, as rumours suggest it soon must, then you will be called upon to turn the tide."

Orsina jerked around to look at her, so close that their noses almost brushed. "So I'm signed up for soldiering too? Every time I blink there's a new job piled on my back."

Harmony wilted back with a sigh. "I am sorry to be the perpetual bearer of bad news."

"I'm just glad someone told me before I got my marching orders."

Harmony nodded back to the packed sand. "So at least you now understand why you must learn to defend yourself?"

Orsina stared out at the humiliations of the morning replaying in her mind. Her lower lip quivering. "I could run away if they try to make me fight."

"And make all our work for nothing?" Harmony had not even considered the possibility, and it now set her mind reeling.

To flee instead of standing her ground, it was a contemptible idea. To back down, and let enemies know that you were afraid? Yet here this peasant was, framing it as though cowardice was the moral choice. "Is it so terrible not to want to hurt anyone?"

"When would the running end, Orsina? How far would you flee, always knowing that if you had stood your ground you might have turned the tide? That your homeland had fallen to the savages of foreign lands when you could have prevented it? At what distant shore would you finally find that there was nowhere else to run, and see that all who might have stood at your side now lie dead in your wake."

Harmony did not know where the words came from. She could feel some echo of her father in them, with his talk of patriotism and pride interspersed through his own sense of personal ownership over all of Espher. She had never swallowed that line of logic herself. To her, duty was a more personal thing, forged from the chains of kinship to her brother and those few others who'd shown her kindness and friendship through the years. Espher was her home, but her attachment to it went little further than that.

The other girl sat there, like she was chewing the words over. Already, Harmony knew that they would not be enough. How could any commoner feel the same attachment to the land that they merely occupied, rather than owning? Was it any wonder that so many of them flitted from place to place if they were not commanded to stay at their stations. Blades of grass grew roots no deeper than the

surface soil. She could not hope to appeal to her in such grandiose terms. A rapid change in direction was necessary. "Haven't you ever wished that you could keep yourself safe? Without having to rely on someone else to protect you?"

Orsina glanced up at her with a heat in her eyes. "I've wanted to be able to whack you with a stick after you chased me around out there for an hour."

Harmony laughed. "Then let us begin with that, and leave quibbles of philosophy until such time as we must face them, what do you say we start over?"

"Alright." Orsina got to her feet. "But the next time you smack my arse I'm going to call a shade up to bully you right back."

Harmony chuckled. "Noted."

She cast her memory back, all the way to the beginning of her own training with the sword. Mimicking the movements she'd seen in the yard in front of her mirror. Fighting with hanging drapes and imaginary foes.

"Stop thinking about it like you're trying to hit somebody, think of it like... like a dance." She glanced across at Orsina's incredulous look and quickly corrected herself. "No, like a conversation!"

Orsina had scooped up her discarded stave and was swinging it back and forth like a club. "What kind of conversations do you have?"

"Just watch. And learn." She spun to face Orsina, stave in high guard, knees bent and balance perfect. She thrust her stave at Orsina, slowly enough that even a blind mule could have seen it coming and reacted. "Hello Orsina, my dear."

Orsina batted it away successfully, though with none of the ease that Harmony might have hoped such an exchange might have brought her. Self-consciously, she answered back to the conversation, "Hi."

"Yes. Good. Now greetings have been handled, the conversation can get started. Shall we swap pleasantries?"

She waited patiently for a moment before Orsina realised that meant it was her turn, then when the clumsy swipe came, she caught it near the tip and turned it away. "Oh perfectly well darling, thank you for asking."

She cut in at Orsina's leg, making her stumble back out of reach. "And how are you?"

"Just." She swung the stave wildly at Harmony's head.

"Fine." Then again at her legs.

"Thanks." A thrust at her centre that Harmony had to turn aside with her own 'sword.'

None of the attacks had any precision or skill behind them, but it seemed that this game had at least granted Orsina some small measure of confidence at least.

So it went the rest of that morning, back and forth. Snippets of conversation interspersed with the clatter of wood on wood. A comment about the weather in the midst of a different subject turned out to be a feign that took Orsina off-guard and left her open to a soft pat on the hip. "What was that?"

"What?" Harmony replied with a little blush. "It wasn't your... rump?"

"The.. that thing where it looked like you were swiping, when you were poking, what was that?"

The same natural curiosity that had driven Orsina forward in their conversations the previous day now sprang to the fore again, and Harmony had to suppress a smile, knowing now with absolute certainty that she'd caught her. She came around beside the girl and showed her the feign, then set aside her own stave to guide Orsina through the motions. Movement by movement. Positioning her feet, turning her shoulders, adjusting her wrist until finally every part of it was perfect and Orsina's grin was wide enough that the top of her head was at risk of toppling off.

The day went on like that from there, the clumsy sparring interspersed with those little lessons. Orsina was not by any means proficient with a sword by the end of the day, and had not come close to actually landing a blow, but there could be no denying that progress had been made. She was slick with sweat when Harmony linked arms with her to make their walk back to the House proper, the men's clothes that the two of them had borrowed from Artemio filthy and marked all over with the lines that the staves had smeared. Yet there was still a smile upon her face and a bounce in her step. Harmony could scarce believe it. Even she was on the verge of exhaustion after the full day's training, while this girl seemed as though she might go on for another ten rounds. "How can it be that you are not tired?"

"What do you mean?"

Harmony clung tighter to her arm, as if she needed help to carry her own weight. "All day we've been at it, and I swear you could go on?"

Orsina pulled away with a laugh. "It was fun. We were dancing. It isn't like walking from dusk until dawn."

"Was that a common feature of your days before you came to the House?" Harmony teased.

"Long way from the Selvaggia to here." Orsina shrugged her shoulders. "Even longer if you've no mule or cart."

Harmony actually stopped in her tracks as she realised that Orsina was not exaggerating. She had vague memories of the forest on her father's maps, so distant from the rest of the Kingdom that it scarcely even had detail. The distances involved boggled her mind. "That is rather a long stroll."

They both fell silent as they passed through the rear door by the lecture hall and Harmony had to slip her blindfold back into place. She took a hold of Orsina's arm once more, trusting in her to guide her back to her suite. Orsina chuckled to her. "The blind leading the blind."

"You don't remember the way?"

"This place is like the deep woods, all twists and turns that make no sense. At least there you could climb a tree and see where you were, this place is just..."

She fell silent, and Harmony could only assume it was because they were passing someone by. She spoke out loudly, "I do believe that they built the House to be as deliberately convoluted as possible, so as to dissuade any of the students from ever finding their way out into the real world beyond the walls where they might discover how little use all of their dusty days of reading are truly worth."

There was a disgruntled sound from whoever they were passing followed by a giggle from Orsina. Silence persisted for a time as Orsina turned her attention inwards, to her memory. Harmony felt stairs then the flex of wooden boards underfoot. Perhaps they were going to find their way without intervention. For her part, she could not bear to bring any doubt into Orsina's mind. Confidence was the only armour she could clad the girl in before throwing her out among the nobles of Espher, the only mask that their contempt could never penetrate. Without her own unassailable certainty of her own excellence, Harmony had no idea how she might make it through a day of the askance glances and sneers from those who were supposed to be her peers. Orsina needed to be sure of herself, sure of everything that she said and did. Sure enough that it would not even cross the mind of those who met her that she did not belong.

They made it to Harmony's chambers in only twice the time it would normally have taken her, making a detour that was presumably meant to bring Orsina back towards the familiar territory surrounding her own room so she could retrace the previous day's steps. Except that when she removed her blindfold, there was only darkness. "Orsina. I think we may have taken a wrong turn."

"Someone's at your door. I don't know her, but she didn't look right. Angry. Like she'd been crying."

There seemed to be genuine concern on Orsina's face, though Harmony had no idea what sort of situation she feared was unfolding here. It was unusual certainly, and the timing of this visit, coinciding with Orsina's arrival, was certainly cause for suspicion, but not hiding in cupboards. "She must be one of the students. If you saw her eyes, she cannot have worn a blindfold."

"No. No blindfold. But..."

"The correct manner to approach such things is directly." Harmony could see the doubt all over Orsina's face. They were never going to manage their deception if the girl would not even meet with others without all this fear. "You and I shall simply walk up to my door, greet her, invite her in for supper with us, and thereafter decipher the purpose and meaning of her visit. You have been carrying yourself well thus far, all that I'd suggest is that you remain quiet if you are uncertain how to proceed rather than putting your foot in it."

She resituated the mask over her face and held out her arm once more, like she was at the ball again. "When you're ready."

The tension in Orsina's arm was palpable. Muscle standing beneath the shirtsleeve like a string of the harp, just waiting to be plucked. Yet despite her dread, she led Harmony out of the closet and back along the corridor. The support pillars for the ringed balconies of the upper levels passed by, each one a presence in the air for but a moment before it was gone behind them. Between them and the creak of the floorboards, Harmony felt quite certain of herself. They were close to the rooms that she now begrudgingly called home when she felt Orsina stiffen at her side. That was no use at all. She would have to work on the girl's comportment before anything else. Some rough edges were to be expected on a lady from the country, but this paralysis in the face of polite company was ridiculous.

The other woman's voice did sound tear strained. "Harmony Volpe?"

With nothing before her eyes but darkness, Harmony tried to smile, "How can I be of assistance to you, miss?"

Darkness and silence were her only answer. Stretching out into a long, awkward silence until the very moment that she heard Orsina cry out in dismay.

That was when the force struck her in the chest like the kick of a horse. Even blind and surprised, her instincts served her well. She curled in on herself, trying to absorb the blow, to catch whoever had struck and to find her balance. It did not work. She had been struck with such force that her feet were no longer in contact with the floorboards.

There was another brief bright flare of pain as her lower back struck the balustrade, but even that was not sufficient to halt her journey. The wood splintered and she ploughed on through. Flipping out into the open air of the atrium and beginning her plummet down to her death.

Her chambers were on the third story of the building. The flagstones below would leave her shattered. She braced herself for the pain. For the darkness to swallow up all her other senses.

She struck water and sank like a stone into a well. The chill water enveloped her, dragging her down and down. The air had been dragged from her as she fell in a warbling cry and now her lungs burned for air. Down and down she went. Drowning deep, still tumbling in the water as bubbles tickled up past her grasping fingers.

As abruptly as the vast pool of water had appeared, it vanished. Harmony fell once more, one final jarring foot before she struck the slick flagstones. She managed only half a gasp before the water hanging above her in a great cold mass lost its cohesion and splashed down over her. Drenching her anew.

She could not comprehend what had just happened. She struggled to gasp in air and her cold numbed fingers fumbled at her blindfold as she desperately tried to make sense of what had happened. All of a sudden hands were upon her and she kicked out, flailing and screaming with none of the nuance she knew that she deployed upon the fencer's field. There were voice raised all around her beyond the grasping hands but between her confusion and the roar of the wind whipping by overhead she could not know whether they were friend or foe. They snatched for her wrists, but once she had stopped trying to free herself of the constraints of her blindfold, they seemed to stop. Cutting through the roar, she could hear a boy's voice. "Get her outside, quickly."

It did nothing to alleviate her fear.

At the top of her lungs, she bellowed, "Orsina!"

There was no answer. Whatever was happening up above them, Harmony had no way of knowing. Her friend might be alive or dead, and she had no way of knowing which. The word friend had come to her thoughts all too easily there, two days together and already the closest to her heart except the brother she'd known a lifetime. It was tragic in so many ways.

Her feet slipped as she scrambled to her feet. She had no idea where she had fallen. No grasp on the world around her beyond the heaving of her lungs and the chill water still sluicing off her. With arms

stretched out ahead of her, she tried to run, to reach. Any pillar would be scratched with its number, she could find herself once more in the map in her mind, find the stairs, find Orsina. She was caught around the waist before she could reach anything, hoisted off her feet, screaming all the way. "Orsina!"

Far beneath them all, a roar was building. So deep and low that it set the walls of the House shaking. The flagstones shuddered beneath their feet. The air filled up with steam as all the water was boiled off, fragrant with the scent of moss and rot. "Out! Everyone out!"

Another voice, perhaps the Prima or one of the tutors. Authority was in it, enough that even Harmony found herself halted in her straining and struggles. She heard the pounding of feet. Felt the air chill as they went from the overheating main hall of the House, and beyond into the sun-kissed afternoon air.

Driving an elbow down into the joint of her abductor's neck and shoulder, she dropped him and found her footing. They were out now, and she had time enough to think, pulling her blindfold away and instantly feeling revulsion as she saw the mildew blossoming across it. That same stain was upon all of her borrowed clothes, and she could see it around the legs and skirts of those brave students who had come to her aid, even knowing she was a pariah.

She felt a pang of sympathy as her rescuer found his way back up to his knees and looked up at her with teary eyes. She winced, as she choked out a brief, "Thanks."

Back to the House she sprinted, if Orsina was still in there, still fighting her battles for her, then she needed to help. It was a simple enough thing for Harmony to elbow her way through the flow of fleeing students but she hit upon the Prima's stare like it were an iron bar. "Do nothing foolish, my dear."

Despite that glare, and the painful knowledge that she only lived so close to her brother through the Prima's continued good will, Harmony still stepped forward. "You don't understand, Prima. Orsina is still in there, someone attacked us, she..."

"It is you who does not yet understand. The girl has called upon one of the great shades, and those that dwell within our walls are disrupted, their forces cast out of balance." With the last of the students running by, the Prima risked a glance back. "Until equilibrium is restored, it shall not be safe for any to walk these halls, let alone those who cannot even look upon them without courting madness."

Still Harmony moved forward, only for the doors of the House to slam shut in her face, seemingly of their own volition. "But Orsina..."

"Shall survive, or not, by her own luck or virtues." At least it seemed to pain the woman to say it. "There is naught any of us can do to intervene."