

**Truth Told by Candlelight**  
***Arancia, Regola Dei Cervi 94***

In the dark of the night, a child was crowning.

The village of Sheepshank appeared on no maps, and was snared by no roads. The villagers, if pressed, could tell you that they lived in the Kingdom of Espher, though if you asked for the name of their king, you'd be liable to come back with no answer. The reach of sovereigns and divine authority did not stretch so far. Kings of old were recounted in tales by the hearth, but with no more sense of reality than the tales of Green Tooth, Ultimo Re, or Aceta Madre in her poison dell.

With no kings, no gods, and no masters, the place locals called Sheepshank may sound an idyll, but there is nowhere in the world free from oppression, and for the shepherds and farmers, fear was the forest.

The Selvaggia stretched deep and dark across the north-east of Espher and beyond, dense and overgrown, tall and prone to creaking out grand operas when the northern winds swept down.

The sheep for which the village was named were Agrantine Blacks, more goat or vane than the puff-balls of wool you'd find in the lowlands; with horns that could stick a shepherd's gut if he was fool enough to crop them when he should have coaxed. If they went wandering onto the steppes to the north, a shepherd would give chase for days and nights. Lynx, wolf and carrion crane would give a Sheepshank shepherd no worry at all. Yet if a sheep went wandering under the canopy of the Selvaggia, it was gone. Such was their fear of the place.

For generations beyond count, the family in the rosemary thatched cottage were born, lived and died in Sheepshank. Grandmothers, mothers and sisters were in attendance on that night, despite the lateness of the hour. Every one of them roused and ready. A kettle boiled water from the well. Old dresses had been torn to rags. All was ready and all was going well.

To city-born folk screaming, sobbing and wailing might have meant different, but farmers knew how meat was butchered and lambing happened. This was Nella's first child, always the hardest. Her own grandmother's pressing hands had assured them that the babe was coming right. All that was left was to be there. Cool hands pressing on frenzied skin. Comforting gibberish whispered in her ear. Firelight and cold winds sweeping in through the gaps in the shutters.

Nella's whole body became an instrument of pain. She bucked and she bowed as the waves of it shook her. The comforting hands became shackles to hold her down, to keep her legs spread though she desperately wanted to clamp them shut against the burning.

She cursed every woman that held her, called them every foul thing that she knew and not a one of them flinched or blinked. The old ones even gave toothless grins at her loathing. They'd all been in her place. If they hadn't she wouldn't be there at all.

When her daughter slipped free of her, she was too numb to even hear her babe cry. She heard nothing at all. Nella's head fell back on a bundled blanket and she dragged in the first breath she could remember taking all night. The air tasted of salt and iron. The heat she'd found unbearable a moment before was now a comfort. She came back to herself and held out her arms for the baby.

It did not come.

The women stood huddled around the child, and even her own mother drifted away from Nella's side to go and peer down at the bundle amongst them. The baby did not cry. Bloodless and aching, Nella tried to haul herself up. Her wracked body betrayed her, she slipped back, she could not see.

The muttering and whispering from the old-mothers were so low that the fire's crackle drowned them out. Nella could not hear them over the hammering of her heart. Her baby. Something was wrong with her baby.

She let out a cry of pain. All the pain she'd swallowed down and pretended not to feel because it would be worth it to hold her baby in her arms came back to her. Sobs racked her as the contractions had moments before.

All at once, eyes turned back to the mother, all comfort flowed back into her and as tears flooded out, the baby, her baby was pressed onto her bare chest. It was warm. She'd thought her baby dead and cold, but even through the tears she could see her move. Blinking the tears away, she saw her daughter for the first time. A full head of dark fuzz that would grow to be curls like hers. Wide eyes. Olive skin. Her daughter lived, but she did not cry.

Bruise coloured lips puckered and worked as an aunt's hands cupped the babe's head and brought them to Nella's breast but still there was no sound. No sound from anyone at all. The silence lay heavy over them.

Sheepshank was home to simple folk, and when simple folk had no answer to the why of something, they feared it. Already in the rear quarters of the rosemary-thatched cottage whispers were spreading. A silent babe was not right. There was no ministry to the souls of Sheepshank, but some things were still known and passed down. Parent to child. Warnings dressed as stories. Fear dressed as whimsy.

From some auntie's bundle of prized possessions a feast-day candle was fetched out, already melted to a nub. They lit it from an ember and carried it to mother and child where they lay.

Even when the babe was plucked from her mother's teat, she didn't weep. Her mouth worked, her eyes opened, but still the baby did not cry out. The candle was held beside her, and her shadows counted.

A shade had no flesh of its own but it hungered for form. This much every child could tell you. Why mushroom circles were to be walked around not trod through. Why the old fields where battles were fought lay fallow and the graven stones standing in the wild places of the world were to be left in peace. What only the wise knew was that when a shade took a body and hid within, it would still cast a shadow of its own. If the baby had been taken by a shade, the candle's light would reveal it.

Pried from Nella's grasp, the new-born showed no need for the support of the hands that held her. Slick from the womb, she should have had no more strength than a bowl of water to hold itself upright, yet this babe turned its head from side to side, blinking those wide eyes in wonder at all the gathered women. The whisper again, "Unnatural."

The candle was held up, just beyond the baby's reach and all eyes turned to see what was cast. There was the baby's shadow, as it should be. Dark and crisp on the white daub wall. The aunties breathed a sigh of relief. The baby's shadow shivered as the candle-flame flickered in the gust.

The candle flame stilled. The shadows did not.

The borders of the shadow were crisp and clean no more, they blurred and twitched. Shapes that had no business dancing on a farmer's wall darted in and out of the baby's body.

Through it all, Nella understood nothing, she looked askance to her mother only to be shushed to silence. She saw only her baby, held up in silhouette. The shadows that propagated across the wall were behind her. The dancing forms of things that should not be were above her head, out of her sight.

The baby did not have two shadows, like a person taken by a shade in a story. She had dozens. All of them springing to life and fading just as fast. Reaching out from the child then snapping back inside. The auntie who held the baby nearly dropped her on the spot. It was only swift intervention that saw the child nestled back in her mother's arms.

The women took their argument to the hearth-side. Huddling around the fire's light as though it might protect them from the frightening things beyond their understanding. Nella cared nothing for their whispered debates. She had her baby in her arms once more. She was drunk on the touch of her. With shaking hands, she stroked the slickness of her own body from the baby's hair. So fluffy already, so soft to the touch. "Orsina, I shall call you. My little bear."

Nella's husband Tobia did not come inside the house, because the old mothers had not called for him. Until they knew what was to be done, it was better not to have more voices raised. Truth be told, they knew what had to be done, but none had the courage to do it. Not when they had just seen the shadows dance.

In the end, some small part of the truth had to be portioned out, and so Nella's husband was called to the door. "Something has gone wrong. We need the midwife."

Nella and Tobia were young, they believed whatever the old and wise told them. With only the crescent moon to see by, he set out. Beyond the village walls, the fields stretched out in plateaus. Nothing was allowed to grow tall between the houses and the forest. Nothing that would give succour to any beast of the wild trying to creep in.

This was where Tobia toiled most of his days. A river had once run through here, but generations ago some clever man from Covotana had come with tools and books. He'd taught their grandparents how to turn the fields they'd once burned flat and kept fallow into rice paddies.

Here and there, an olive tree still grew between the shelves of earth, but they produced little and their fruits were bitter. Still, they served as markers on Tobia's course through the sucking mud. Even in the dark of the night this place was so familiar to him that he was not liable to falter, but with dread lodged in his gut, it helped him to have something as solid as bitter olive wood to cling to for comfort.

Selvaggia loomed large on the horizon. A lurking beast growing greater with each step he took towards it. Soon the moon itself seemed to be swallowed down into the dark of the wood, and all Tobia had to guide him on was the starlight.

Even now on the verge of panic, he would not enter the forest. To lose his wife or his child would be the greatest tragedy that he could imagine, but they were things in the woods that went beyond the limits of his imagination. Fears he could not name. Nightmares of which he could not dream.

Beneath the reaching boughs, Tobia came to a halt. With shaking hands he struck sparks to tinder in the vine wrapped brazier that was now more verdigris than copper. Three times he struck sparks with no luck at all. It was a still night, with no wind to blame, and the moss was dry to the touch. Again and again he struck the little clumps of pyrite together to no avail until finally they were snatched from his hands.

He nearly lost his footing before he recognised the woman beside him. He had not seen the midwife come. Her limping steps had broken no twig and rustled no leaf. It was as though she'd sprung up fully formed right by his elbow to tut at him disapprovingly. "Born on the wrong side of the sheets with no father to teach you how to bang rocks?"

With a twist of her wrists, sparks seemed to shower from the tinder-stones and the brazier whose light was meant to call her out from the depths of the woods caught aflame. She gave him a moment to speak, and when it became obvious he was too busy tripping over his own words, she filled in the blanks. "They're wanting for me in the village, then?"

"My wife." He blurted, "Our baby."

The old woman's face was impossible to see in the depths of her hood, but when she held out her hands to warm them by the flames they were weathered and wrinkled, like the skin of a roasted feast-day bird. "Which be ailing? Mother or babe?"

Tobia's mind froze up. There were things that he knew he should not say to the midwife, and they flooded his mouth before he could bite down. He was not to ask her questions about the forest. He was not to ask how she lived, or where she lived. He was never to ask if she lived alone. The moment stretched out, until he realised what she was truly asking. "Both? They didn't tell me."

Her next tut sounded like a nut being cracked. "Didn't think to be asking, eh? Your wife and your baby and you didn't even think to..."

She moved off still muttering to herself before he had the time to answer, striding towards the distant watch-fires meant to keep the things of the forest in sight and at bay. Tobia had to jog to keep up with her. The rice fields did not seem to slow her, she moved like an old hand, placing her steps on the hidden stones beneath the surface with an ease that Tobia envied.

As they came closer to the light, he saw more of the old woman. The draped shawls he'd taken for black were greens and violets, rough woven but pristine and vibrant. Her face was still turned from him, as it always had been in childhood's bad dreams. Until the final moments.

The watchman gave no challenge and the packed dirt of the few streets Sheepshank could muster lay empty as the midwife stalked through the village with Tobia still trailing behind. She was a thing of the Selvaggia, but the village had made their peace with her, turning their eyes away in exchange for the care she provided them. The only thing from the Selvaggia that they wouldn't try to burn on sight. Though the young and foolish might toss rocks at her when she was spotted flitting through the trees.

Tobia followed her all the way to his own home where she was ushered inside and the door slammed shut in his face. This was not a place for fathers. Not yet.

Nella still lay with the babe in her arms, marvelling at the cooing and sighing it made. The old mothers had said nothing to her, and would not unless they were forced. It was a terrible thing to lose a child. Why not let her bask in the moments she had?

It took but a moment for the situation to be explained to the midwife, and a moment longer before she laid her hands on Orsina. "That be a good name for this runt. Bears bear burdens well."

No grown man of Sheepshank would have met the midwife's eyes, few of the women either, but Orsina had no fear in her yet.

"Alright then shades, who be riding in this baby?"

There was no reply from the child, though it was clear that a shade rode her even now. Before the midwife's eyes, Orsina's hair was growing longer. She looked a week old already.

"Come now, speak your name shade. There's few don't know me in these parts. Tell me true and I'll not feed you to Ginny Greenteeth."

This time there was an answer, but it was cacophonous. Voices screeching and screaming to be heard over one another. A legion within.

The midwife rocked back as though she had been struck. Mothers, aunts and grandmothers quivered in terror.

They say that the touch of cold iron could drive out a shade. That being shown its own reflection could startle it from a body. They say a lot of things, and few of those things are true, but there are some small talismans that can drive a lesser shade away. Mixtures and tinctures made from the mushrooms that grow around shade-circles. Meteoric iron. Things that only the brave or the mad could harvest. The wizened little pouch that the midwife drew out from her shawl held some of those things. To the right buyer, that pouch would be worth than the whole of Sheepshank, not that anyone in the room knew it. She pressed it to the baby's chest.

The shutters of the house burst open. The hearth fire died. Every breath was held. In the total darkness, the only sound was the baby's wail. It was done.

The old mothers felt sure that things had been set aright. Nella had never understood what was wrong to begin with, only that the pouch now bound to the baby with a deer-leather cord was never to be taken off. Not even when they bathed her.

All the cheer that had been silenced along with Orsina's cries came out in full force. It was early in the morning, but there were few houses that held no cousin or friend to Nella and her kin. The whole village rose early and partook in the celebrations, the rosemary thatched house filled up. Hands were clapped. Shoulders squeezed. Gifts of cloth and durum flour enough to last through weeks or more. Through it all the baby cried and it was like music to the ears of the old wives, even as the menfolk flinched.

For Tobia, the fear had been replaced with joy. His daughter wasn't even a day old and she'd already been promised an apprenticeship when she came of age. She would never know the toil of the field, cut rot from her feet or wake with a crooked back. Her fortune had been assured by some accident of birth, and while she'd never be wed and bring a bride-price to her family, it was a small price to pay for such a hope.

Tobia meant to walk the old woman back to the border of the woods, to talk over the details and keep her safe from harm but she was nowhere to be seen once he was done planting the same soft kisses on Orsina and Nella's heads.

At the edge of the village, the watchman saw the brazier by the Selvaggia blink out and settled back into the layered warmth of his cloaks to wait out the night. If he could not see to the edge of the woods, he would not have to know what was there. If he did not see the beasts of the wood, his dreams would not be haunted.