

Shield of Virtue
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112

The winter rains gave way to spring rains. The difference barely noticeable to two poor travellers on foot. They gave Kagan an excuse to keep his hood up at least. An excuse that he had to use more and more often as they moved deeper into inhabited territory. The wild lands of the north gave way to smooth rolling hills of carefully cultivated fields and orchards.

Roads had given them swift passage down to this dangerous place, away from the wild places that the civilised feared, but now they led through towns and they were peppered with wagons and carriages and eyes. Always Kagan felt them on him. Not a real awareness like he felt from the horses, but an imagining that lay as heavy on him as the load on his back.

The girl could no longer be called a girl in all honesty, she was a grown woman now thanks to the years that the day they did not speak of had taken from her. He'd hoped that the harshness of the road might have thinned her back down to a girlish shape, but as her muscles grew taut and her belt buckle tightened, it only emphasised how much she'd changed. He did not care for it. Still, he could not deny that Orsina's old fire was still within this new shape.

Kagan truly believed that the strain of travel might have killed the girl, yet here she was, still bounding along at his side, keeping to his pace despite his longer stride and carrying enough breath to chatter on throughout the day despite it all. Even the rain seemed to stop troubling her after the first week while it still sank into him until he felt like his muscles were cold blubber. Everything they saw had to be observed, commented on, explained. He found himself tiring long before she did.

The only solace of her constant chatter was that he did not need to keep such careful watch through the day. If a rider was approaching, she'd have twenty questions about it before they were close enough to see. If there was a walled town up ahead, she'd be asking about the flags flapping on its ramparts. He couldn't have asked for a better scout.

Towns, they skirted around, but the riders they could no longer afford to avoid if they meant to make any progress. Oxen drew carts at half the pace a man could walk. Trains of farmers heading to market turned the paved stretches between the fields into vast dawdling social gatherings despite the inclement weather. Kagan's hood stayed up.

Those nights when they could, they'd taken shelter in outhouses and barns, unnoticed and leaving before dawn so that the owners could make no complaint. The few times they'd been spotted by ill luck, Kagan had been forced to slink back into the shadows and let Orsina do the talking. That she was so young and guileless paid dividends. Nobody believed that she could be doing anything untoward, and the story of their trek to the city – once carefully stripped of its reason – was a familiar one.

Kagan used her as a shield through all their long walk south, resenting her chatter, but dreading its end too. He had not meant to become attached to this girl. He had not meant to care for her like she was his own. Every day, he was forced to remind himself that she was a monster, a slayer, the most wicked of all who walked the earth, but so far from home he found that even that fundamental truth seemed

weaker. The dull pain he felt when he looked at her was less about her sin, and more about the day when he turned back north and never saw her again.

That day crept closer with every step.

Where there were more people, Kagan lost more control of their situation. When they got close enough to see the rise to Covotana the roads had grown dense and packed, they could not skirt around the crowd. There was no escape. They moved with the farmers and traders. Orsina drifted away from him and back as they shuffled along with all the other peasantry, and for the first time Kagan was forced to really contend with how far he had fallen from grace. In any Arazi settlement, this crowd would have parted for him, flung themselves in the ditch to make way for a man of his stature, just as these people would part for a cavalier on horseback. He tugged his hood lower over his face and thanked the skies for foul weather.

Eyes everywhere. Eyes on him, studying him from behind bow-slits on guard towers. Eyes of farmers, wide and fearful of his size. Of merchants, taking measure of his clothes, his worth. One wrong step and he could die here. All it would take was for one of them to draw attention and he was doomed.

He nearly did their work for him when a soft hand closed around his claws. He had almost leapt away before he realised it was Orsina. "Nearly through."

The low rumble of his laugh started in his chest before he caught it. She was comforting him. He was delivering her into some nightmare life of servitude to the necromancers of Espher, and she was trying to calm him like a spooked wyvern.

Unchallenged, they moved beneath the walls of the city. An impossible show of overconfidence, or perhaps just a necessity with so many bodies moving through the pinch of the gates. If every one was stopped and questioned then crops would rot in the wagons and the tail of the queue would expire of old age.

When they stepped out into Covotana it was all that the two of them could do to keep from gaping. Neither one had seen a city like this before. For all that he was worldly, Kagan had never dared approach any town in Espher, and there was nowhere beyond the steppes like this. There was nothing like this anywhere else in the world.

White plaster and marble statuary rose up from terracotta streets. Water flowed everywhere, from fountains, from rooftops, through gutters, fresh and bright even as all the mud of the road was tracked in. At the centre of it all, the palace rose like a shining pinnacle of achievement, impossible for the younger kingdoms and empires of the world to match.

It was easy to forget how long Espher had stood. While the Arazi still painted their faces with the blood of their kin and rode wyvern across the wild north, brawling in tribes, squabbling over who got to gnaw the bones of their hunts, Espher had built a tower into the sky. The foundations had been laid before the first dragon was tamed, but more than that, what had been built atop those foundations had stood unchanged through all the generations that followed.

There was beauty here in the city. Not the natural beauty that Kagan held above all others, but something close. Something human but rebuilt and grown over so many times that the artifice had been

worn away. Until the city had become a natural place that change washed over. A mountain made by hand.

Away from the crowd, Kagan suddenly found himself lost with no sign of a landmark or star to guide him. It fell to Orsina to lead him by the hand once more, and on she did, through markets packed to bursting and streets of houses stacked atop each other until they blocked out the sky, until the bowl of the city became the whole world and even sound could not escape it. Voices echoing back and forth until Kagan became convinced that this was the necromancy that he'd always been warned the Espher practiced. The voices of those long gone, still echoing.

To cross the distance of the city on the open road would have taken them a few hours at most. Through the tangled warren of streets, parks, dead ends, twists and turns, it took them the rest of the day and into the evening before the House of Seven Shadows even came into sight.

Of all the sights that Orsina had relentlessly described as they made their way through the city this was perhaps the least striking. She said nothing at all once she had realised which building they were looking up at, and as they approached the gates, and the servant standing waiting by those gates, it seemed that her voice had failed her entirely.

Kagan had seen fear take men's voices like that before, but he'd never expected it of the girl who faced down a dragon empty handed. He reached down and caught her hand. "You don't need to go any further. There will be other ways to manage your... problem."

She shook her head and forced a smile. "This is where I'm meant to be."

"Where you want to be is where you're meant to be."

"I get what you're doing, and I appreciate it but..." She stared up at the building beyond the gardens, looming low against the night sky but casting such a long shadow he worried she might drown in it. "There's no way out of this. I am still going to be what I am. Whether I'm here or anywhere else."

He let her hand go and approached the servant on sentry duty, letter already in hand. If she meant to move fast and leave her fears behind her, he would not stand in her way. Even if their haste brought parting ever closer.

Some sort of relay began as they watched, one servant running the letter to another further into the grounds, on and on, all the way up to the House itself, where a blindfolded servant in plain black grey livery came to carry it away. Time ticked by. Kagan was painfully aware of the girl standing shaking at his side. At the servant, studying his face, his hands. Eyes pressing at him again. He could not wait to be free of this beautiful city and all its inquisitive citizens.

When someone came from the house, it was the Prima herself. A stately woman garbed in the same greys as the servants, severe, with her hair drawn back into a high, artful tangle. A servant walked along the side of the path, holding out a parasol to keep the rain from touching her.

Until the final moment the Prima's face was that of every other noble Kagan had ever met and he was ready to snatch up Orsina and run, but as the Prima stepped into the light of the street lanterns, a thin lipped smile appeared upon her face. "You have chosen a most fortuitous night to arrive in our company. We have more students absent than present. Attending the Spring Ball."

She held up the letter, "You are spoken of very highly. Your skills as a binder of shades has been compared here to some of the finest students of this great institution. The only question that I have is, who exactly this Aceta Madre actually is."

Kagan and Orsina glanced at each other in confusion. "I was to be her apprentice..."

"Yes, I have heard all about what a swift study you are, I just do not know who you studied under." Prima Cicogna flapped the letter out like a courtesan's fan. "She writes to me as a peer, yet I have not a clue as to her education, lineage, or indeed your own provenance."

Orsina's brows drew down. "I'm from the Selvaggia, I mean, Sheepshank."

When that did nothing to illuminate the teacher, Kagan added in his bass rumble. "At the foot of the steppes."

That only seemed to exasperate the Prima more. "But what line were you born of child? Who were the shade binders of your family?"

"What?" Orsina cocked her head to one side, as though the odd-shaped thought might fit in better at a different angle. "They were farmers?"

The Prima let out a titter. "You surely jest. Both of them?" She leaned in closer, speaking softer. "Listen to me child, this is a place of learning, not a place of judgement. If you were born on the wrong side of the sheets..."

"I wasn't!" Orsina bleated in surprise, head snapping around to Kagan. "Was I?"

He shrugged helplessly.

"My dear child, the binding of shades is a hereditary blessing passed down through the noble families of Espher. A gift from our ancestors. Farmers do not receive that gift."

Kagan shrugged again when no answer was forthcoming. "She's got it."

"Worry not, my dear." The Prima placed a comforting hand on Orsina's shoulder, then lifted it clear when she felt how crusted the girl's cloak actually was. "This is far from the first time in the history of this institution that we have encountered a student of unclear provenance. We shall simply fabricate some lesser known house for you until such time as you are wed into a greater one."

Once more Kagan found himself growling involuntarily. "Wed?"

The Prima held up her hands with a light laugh. "Or adopted, if that is the course that she chooses to take. If she has the capabilities that this letter claims, there shall be an abundance of noble houses desperate to make her theirs, I should not worry."

Orsina had been so thrown by everything that she'd faced so far, that the fire at her core seemed to have been tamped down. With the challenge hidden in the Prima's words Kagan saw it flare back to life. "I do."

"Well my dear, why don't you allow me to be the judge of that. Come inside and we shall test you as all our new students are tried." She moved to put an arm around Orsina's shoulders, then thought better of

it. Calling back over her shoulder as she headed back up to the House. "Your servant may depart, if he too is so confident in your talent."

Kagan could still feel the weight of all the city's eyes upon him. He needed to be gone from this place as fast as his legs could carry him. Crouching down until he was nose to nose with Orsina, he rumbled, "Take care of yourself, girl."

She lunged for him and he fully expected the usual slug in the shoulder before her attack resolved itself into a hug. "You too."

The bounce was back in her step when she set off after the Prima. Diving head first into the long shadow of the house. Kagan watched her for longer than he meant to. Planning all the while to turn and leave. Telling himself that it was foolish to be hung up on sentiment. That sentiment would get him killed, standing around just to watch the girl go.

He dragged himself off into the night streets the moment she was out of sight. Moving just a little faster than was advisable after so long standing still. It was like passing through a dense forest, or the tunnels that they sometimes found basilisk burrowed into chalky hills. Kagan hated it, but he pressed on all the same. The long curving road where the House of Seven Shadows had nestled gave away to the warren and then to what Kagan would have called a real city, the slums. The size that had made him stand out so badly among farmers and traders kept him safe here. Eyes peered out of the shadows but they passed over him smooth as the rainwater.

He'd be marching all through the night to get clear of the city gates come dawn, but it would be worthwhile to be out into air untainted by the breath of a hundred others. He was so caught up in his mad dash for freedom that he scarcely noticed the guardsmen closing off every entrance to the square where he'd stumbled until he'd almost reached their line. "Dragonlord. What brings you to our city in the dead of night?"

Kagan backed away slow, hands lifted up from his sides so that even in the dim light they could see he had no weapons. Or at least none in hand. "I've no dragon, my friends, and my business was just that. Business. Had a delivery to make."

The guard who was speaking stepped out of line, closing in on Kagan. Confident with his men at his back. "Spying are you?"

"No, sir." Kagan stared down at the man's feet. He'd met plenty of men like this through his years too. All noise and swagger, just desperate to swing their petty power around and get the respect that they had in no way earned, but were entirely convinced that they deserved. "Just passing through, sir."

The man was close enough that even over the city's background chatter, Kagan could actually hear him smile. "That's just what the last spy said too."

Kagan had judged him wrong. "Shit."

Kagan was sluggish from all his days on the road. His hunting instincts turned to mush with inaction. His fist caught the guard under the chin and lifted him clean off his feet.

There was no point in running when every exit was blocked, all he'd do would be to burn through the precious little strength he had left. Instead he put his head down and charged the closest line of guards.

All he had to do was break through and run. If this was all the personal crusade of the one unconscious guard intent on aggrandising himself at the expense of others, he'd be able to stroll right out of the city.

Guard's clubs swung down to meet him. Hammering into his broad back. Knocking him to his knees. Human bones would have broken under the cudgels. He was made of sterner stuff.

Roaring, he came up into their legs and bowled them over. Still they were swinging, raining down blow after blow. He did not stop. He did not flinch.

The slap of boots on the paved road warned him that the other guardsmen were closing in. Kagan had to push through now or they were going to take him. He had never been captured, except when he handed himself over for the judgement of his kinfolk. He had never been tortured, for it had never been necessary. All of these things he knew of only from stories. Stories he had no desire to live out.

Up on his feet, his legs coiled beneath him, ready to leap and bound free of the tangle of bodies and bludgeons. That was when the closest guards leapt on his back and carried him down to meet the ground once more. Feet and clubs. Pain digging down through all the layers of ridged bone and scaled skin, until finally blessedly Kagan felt nothing more.