

The Waters of the Woods
Arancia, Regola Dei Cerva 111

When Orsina followed him into the woods Kagan made no complaint. The old woman wouldn't let her young apprentice wander the woods if it weren't safe. Neither one of them had too much to say in their first few trips out together – Kagan was used to being alone, Orsina was used to nothing but sniping and rebuttal each time she opened her mouth – but they found their rhythm soon enough. “Why did you get exiled?”

Kagan bit back his anger. She was a child no matter how much she'd grown since last he saw her. She had the tact of a child. “Crimes.”

“What sort of crimes did you do? Did you try to steal a dragon's treasure pile? Did you seduce the dragon-king's mistress?”

He paused mid-step. “Do you even know what seduce means?”

“Kissing, right?”

He shrugged. “Close enough.”

She caught up to him, close enough to faux-whisper, “So you got exiled for kissing crimes?”

For a long moment, he was silent, then eventually he let out a gruff sigh. “No.”

“Did your dragon get exiled too?”

He could feel a headache on the far horizon, creeping closer with every question. “No.”

“So you had a dragon?”

“Yes.”

She was bouncing as she walked at his elbow. Her braid springing up and down behind her. “What was it like? What are dragons like?”

“Large.” He rumbled. Then realising it wasn't quite enough. “Reptilian.”

“Did you ride your dragon?”

The memory of it ached. The furnace beneath his legs. The scales shimmering in the sunlight, above the clouds. “Sometimes.”

“Did you have a special saddle for it?”

He blinked. “Yes.”

“That must have been expensive, all that leatherwork. Back in Sheepshank they used to say making tackle was the most expensive work they ever got done.”

“I don't recall the price.”

“Was it a long long time ago?”

He tried to count back through the years of his exile and realised that he had lost count somewhere. “Before you were born.”

“So are you really really old?”

For the first time, he looked put out by a question. “No.”

“So you were really young for a dragon lord?”

“No.”

“Were you young when you did your kissing crimes?”

He had slowed to a crawl, head cocked to one side, listening. When he could not sense any sign of his quarry, he answered her. “I was younger, but not young.”

“So you were exiled for kissing old people?”

He let out an exasperated groan. “No kissing.”

“You were exiled for not kissing?” The snap of her fingers silenced the birds in the trees around them. “You broke off an arranged marriage meant to tie two feuding families together and left the dragon empire on fire in a civil war?”

“I thought the hag didn’t tell you stories.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I can’t tell myself them.”

They crossed a stream, her bounding along without a care in the world, him lifting her cautiously to avoid anything that might have been lurking down in the gully. For a few blessed moments, there was silence, then she started up again. “You don’t talk much do you?”

“You do.”

“Mother Vinegar says I never stop talking. She says I drive her up the wall.”

He raised a scaled brow. “Indeed.”

“That’s why she said I should go out hunting with you today, so she could get some peace. Which I think is just silly because...”

“Shh.”

“...even though I talk a little bit she talks even more. She even talks when she is on her own or she thinks I’m sleeping. I think it is because she’s been stuck out here in the...”

Kagan reached back and covered her mouth. She nipped his palm with her teeth, but he did not flinch. This was not their first time playing this game. When she tried to pull back and return to her ceaseless chatter, he pointed the tip of his spear across the clearing.

It was like a water fowl gone terribly awry. Tall as Kagan at the shoulders, but taller still when it raised up its head at the end of a serpentine neck. There was a shimmer of scales beneath the feathers, an

amalgam beast of serpent and bird. Orsina couldn't tear her gaze away for the eyes, turning from the talons and stumpy wings to seek the reflection of the dying day in the golden saucers turned her way.

By all rights it should have run. Yet it stood there, stiff as a petrified log. Orsina had never felt Kagan power, never even felt the slightest press from him. From what few snippets of the Arazi arts Mother Vinegar had been willing to whisper, she didn't even know if she'd be able to feel him working at all. All she could do was guess that the calm was emanating from Kagan. Sympathetic emotion that flooded the crocorax's head and made it stand perfectly still as he took his aim and threw.

The bird toppled and Kagan released whatever hold he had on it. For the briefest moment, Orsina could feel the shade of the terror-bird in her head. The tangle of instinct and emotion and pain, before it faded away to nothing.

Kagan didn't see his little companion flinch, he was too focused on the hunt, on the prey. He'd crossed the distance to the dying bird and hauled out his spear before Orsina even saw him moving.

His shoulders strained as he tried to lift the bird whole. "Now I remember why I bring you along, so you can carry things."

She was back at his side and grinning, pushing all thoughts of what she'd just felt aside. "Aw, is the big chicken too heavy for you?"

"Why don't you try to lift her?"

Orsina was nothing if not willing to try new things. She got both shoulders under the bird's long neck and managed to stand upright. Blood ran down into her hair. "I've got my end."

"Ah yes. The head is the heavy part, isn't it. Giant brain. Crocos are known to be so clever."

Orsina blew her blood-slicked curls away from her face. "Smart enough to hunt in packs."

Kagan drew a great knife, the blade as wide as Orsina's palm, and set to work splitting the head from the body. "Not this one. She's a straggler from off the steppes."

"What could scare a terror-bird all the way down here?" The head came away and the rest of the body toppled to the side with a crunch of foliage.

"Nothing. Even a wyvern would leave them in peace. Too much trouble. That's how you know this one wasn't the sharpest arrow in the quarrel. Probably spooked by the sound of its own farts."

With no chance of hauling the beast along whole, Kagan was butchering it in the field. He cocked his head once or twice to sniff and Orsina, recognising the motion, had frozen in place expectantly. Each time he shrugged and went back to his work she let out the held breath. The third time, she'd finally asked him. "Scavengers?"

He scoffed. "The bird's stink should hold them off long enough. Plenty will come pick over the body, but none would risk the claws. If we're quick, we're fine."

With a little spin on the spot, Orsina shucked the crocorax's severed head from off her shoulders to splatter in the bushes. The sudden thump set the birds in the canopy above to flight, but nothing went

scurrying away. There were no rats, rabbits or any of the other little things that filled Mother Vinegar's stew pot to be seen. Maybe the terror-bird really had scared them off.

A giblet hit her in the side of the head. "Are you helping?"

"Keeping watch is helping."

He growled. "We don't need to keep watch. Come help peel the skin away."

She turned to look upon his work and felt her stomach turn. "I do not want to do that.

"Nobody wants to do it," He hauled hard and the whole side of meat was exposed. "But they all want to eat. Do you want to eat?"

She'd turned pale enough that her freckles made an appearance. "Not anymore."

It wasn't often that she got to hear anyone laugh these days. So when Kagan's belly laugh rumbled out she didn't even care that it was at her expense. Her own face cracked into a grin at the sight of him rocking back on his heels.

Later, when she pieced her memory of that day back together, she would wonder if it was all the noise that they were making that had drawn the dragon to them. If it had been the scent of all that blood. If the dragon had been the thing hunting the crocorax all the way from the steppes. If it was just bad luck that their paths had crossed. The last seemed the least likely to her, after so long in Mother Vinegar's tutelage she struggled to believe in coincidence.

The dragon burst out between the trees, knocking oaks aside like they were tinder-wood. It was everything that the stories of the great beasts of the Arazi aeries spoke of and so much more. No story spoke of the wave of heat that washed out ahead of their coming. The furnace dryness that pulsed from their bronzed scales. The sheer insurmountable bulk of a creature so large it almost defied explanation. Orsina's eyes rejected it.

It could not be alive and so massive. It could not move with such sinuous grace and such power as to topple the very woods as it passed through. Not a creature, but a force of nature. A natural disaster on four legs, wings tucked tight to its sides, but flexing with each bellow pulse of breath.

She was so busy being in awe of the beast that she could not even see the danger. She did not see the claws, the teeth, the flames coiling between them.

Kagan hit her full on as the fire leapt out at them, bearing her down to the dirt and rolling off to extinguish what little of the sizzling venom had clung to his cloak. With hands held wide he called out in the Arazi tongue.

The dragon showed no sign of understanding any more than Orsina did. The great burning eyes narrowed at the sound of a voice and it surged towards them. Even now in what could have been her final moments, Orsina could not shut up. "Are you planning on lording over this dragon any time soon, dragon lord!?"

He scooped her up and ran, but it was pointless. There was no tree in the forest that could hold back a dragon. "It does not work that way."

Fire spread in their wake, but still Kagan ran. There was no question that the dragon could overtake them, only a matter of time. When life narrowed to moments, every extra moment that could be squeezed out was a victory. The forest that had become home passed Orsina in a blur. She wrestled to be free of Kagan, to run for herself, but it was no use. She bounced against his shoulder, rattling alongside the spears on his back.

She could see the great beast keeping pace with them, tearing up trees and casting them aside as it went, unflinching, relentless. "We can't outrun it."

"I know." Kagan leapt over a gully that Orsina would not have even seen. Even now he moved through the forest like it was his home.

The dragon didn't even need to leap. Its great clawed feet were longer than the gap. It crossed without even noticing.

Orsina was sixteen years old. She had spent most of the time that she could remember alone in the most frightening place in the world. She did not need courage, this was where she lived. "Then stop running. Stand and fight."

"I cannot."

She thumped her fists on his back. "You're going to die anyway. Fight it!"

"You are not Arazi. You don't understand." His voice dropped to a rumble, almost impossible to hear. "I will not harm a dragon. I will not. There is no greater evil."

Orsina rolled her eyes. "Did nobody teach her that eating people is bad?"

"She is feral. Unbound."

She thumped against his back. "So bind her!"

"I cannot! I am already... I cannot."

The flames burst out from amidst the trees once more. Washing across Orsina's back.

What had run smoothly off the dragon scales on Kagan's flesh clung to her hair, to her clothes. It burned like nothing she'd ever felt. Hotter than the burning sun, hotter than the brightest fire. Kagan dropped her to the dirt once more. Tried to smother the fire in the loose soil and mulch, but each time one part was damped out, another blazed to life.

Orsina could not help but scream. A mindless, animal response to the pain. It wouldn't matter in a moment. The dragon was upon them. Rearing up on its hind legs, balancing with its tail, it stood taller than the great old trees around it. Wings stretched out wide in triumph.

"Not like this." Orsina hissed.

Ginny Greenteeth swept into her. Not just a welcomed guest, but demanded. Commanded.

Orsina's eyes brimmed over with stagnant water. Her body, scorched and stung by the dragon's fire, was swept clean of every ember as the flood came pouring forth. Pond weed coiled out of her hair. Silt and mud oozed from between her lips to dribble to the leaves below.

Kagan did not know the voice that came bubbling out. *"The water is lovely, deep and cool."*

As the dragon gnashed down at her, Orsina did not flinch. *"Deep enough to drown a fool."*

Kagan cried out as she was swallowed down whole, but he was not surprised. No matter what witchery the girl had at her beck and call, she was only human. Nothing human could withstand a dragon. Nothing in the world could withstand a dragon.

It had been a long time coming, but Kagan had always known that he would meet his end by dragon's fire. He drew himself back up to his feet to face it with some dignity. All these long years in exile had been lived in the memory of this moment, standing proudly before a dragon awaiting the death he was due. It was almost a relief to have come full circle. Like fate had circled close once before, but now the orbit was ended. He held up his arms and accepted his death.

It did not come.

The dragon's jaws snapped open, the magmatic glow of its innards washing out over the dim forest floor, but the fire did not come. A great ugly gout of steam rolled out, reeking of rot and ruin, but flaming death did not. Whether Kagan or the dragon were more surprised by this was impossible to say.

Something deeper than sense drew him forward. Some instinct that mattered more to the Arazi than self-preservation. The dragon's serpentine neck bunched and coiled as it tried to regurgitate whatever morsel was blocking the flow of flame, and without thinking Kagan reached out to stroke along its scales and offer comfort. He had not thought that he would ever touch dragon-scale again, when the sharp edges bit into his palm, he bore it with all due reverence. It felt like home.

The dragon began to back away, as though the knot in its throat was a fixed location that it could simply move around. Mud burst forth from its mouth with every heaving breath. There was no question of the fire within it being quenched, such a thing could not be done, but for all its power and majesty it was still alive. It still needed to breathe.

Over and over it retched and retched, bringing up mud, tangled pondweed and water, endless slopping waves of stagnant water. The clawed feet, so steady beneath it just a moment ago splayed in the churned mud as it struggled for air. Kagan did not even know that he was screaming. "Stop it! Stop! Orsina! You must stop. You are killing her!"

If the girl could hear him from inside the great burning heart of the beast, he could not say. Even if she could, what did words matter to Ginny Greenteeth who rode her. The dragon stumbled, the low rumble of her furnace heart faltering and spluttering as she drowned.

Kagan's voice had given out by the time the dragon died, just as the dim light was failing. It felt like hours had passed since the ordeal began, but time had lost its meaning. When the time finally came, he felt it more than he saw it. Not only was the presence of the beast in his mind gone in an instant, so too went the heat.

When it died, it ceased to be a dragon. To all outward appearances, nothing had changed, but to Kagan and his kind, the change was obvious. He moved from the paralysis of the horror he had witnessed back to the practicality of a huntsman as he rose, drawing his blade. Feeling along the soft underbelly of the dragon until he could feel the lump. Slicing between the scales cleanly, without tears blurring his vision.

He had none left to cry. Orsina slipped out in a shower of blood and pond filth and lay there in the mud for a long moment.

There were no rites for dead dragons among the Arazi, but when the unbound died, they were carried as high up into the mountains as they could be borne and laid out for the sky to take them. She'd done the most wicked thing that could be done, but she'd done it to save him.

Orsina was not one of his people, but she had died so that he might live. He felt the same stab of duty and obligation as if she were kin. He looked down at her, curled about herself like the very first time he'd met her, sleeping on the floor of the witch's cottage. Just a child.

Her constant tangled mess of hair splayed about her now, twice the length it had been before he'd seen fire scorch it away. He reached out to brush it from her cheek and then snatched his hand back. She was still warm. For all the mud and stagnant water clinging to her ragged clothes, she still felt alive. The last heat of the dragon perhaps. He pricked her cheek with his claw and she flinched away.

Alive. Impossibly alive. She stirred beneath his hands like she was having a bad dream. He could not believe it. "Orsina."

She did not answer. The constant prattle of her voice did not come. The protestations at being woken. The bitching and the moaning. None of it. He shook her. "Orsina!"

There were a dozen different ways that she could be dying, and after fishing the clot of mud and slime from her mouth to be sure she was breathing, he could think of a cure to not one of them. Mother Vinegar would have all the answers.

Meat, dragon and sorrow forgotten, he scooped her up.

Reeking of dragon, blood and venom, there was no beast in the Selvaggia fool enough to test him that day and he cast aside all stealth in his hurry. The low hanging brambles skittered over his thick skin, scratching at the places where he was the most human and passing over the rest without a mark.

He had never moved so fleetly through the Selvaggia in all his years there, and he would never run that way again. Heart in his mouth, terror at his heels. He had known fear before, he was born to fear and knew it like an old lover, but he had never felt this way before. As though he had something left to lose.

The door to the old rickety cottage was knocked clean off its hinges as he barrelled in, and the old woman had a dagger from out of her apron and pointed before either one of them saw the other. Orsina hung limp between them for just an instant before Mother Vinegar was swept up in the same frantic motion that had carried him this far.

She was borne down onto the furs by the fire, Mother Vinegar hissing and cursing all the way. Her withered fingers darting about so fast and sure that Kagan couldn't follow their motions. "You damned fool. You stupid, blithering wretched imbecile."

Kagan drew back, but he had no words to defend himself. "There was no way I could have known. There was no way anyone could have known that a dragon would come to these woods. Do you think I'd be here if I'd known that..."

Mother Vinegar didn't even hear him as she drew the scorched cloth away from the strips of old scarred skin where the dragon's fire had eaten into the girl. "...moronic things to do, letting the girl go roaming all by herself when you knew that she wasn't ready yet. You knew she wasn't. She shouldn't have been out the doors without a watcher. She shouldn't have had a minute to be tempted. You daft old hag, you've gone soft."

"She did it for... It was for me. She saved us both." He shuddered at the memory of the girl's voice, half Orsina, half Ginny Greenteeth. "She did a terrible thing, but it was for the right reasons."

"A year of her gone for naught." Mother Vinegar let out a groan as she worked her way down the girl, checking her over. "Ugh. Hair for miles. Burns healed rough with no poultice. Teats fit to bursting on her."

Kagan averted his eyes as the prodding went lower. "She's a dragon-slayer now. My people will want her blood. Espher too, though they'll draw it slower."

Finally it was enough to make the old witch take notice. "What's that, now?"

"The dragon." He said it slow, like she was a startled mare. "She killed it."

The old woman scoffed. "What shite you talk, boy. There's no dragons in these woods."

The day caught up to him in a rush. The pointlessness of the argument. The ache in his legs. He sank to the floor with a huff. "Not any more. A feral was breathing fire a few miles north before it crossed her."

Old as Mother Vinegar was, her eyes were still shrewd. Narrowed as she examined his face. "A dragon? Not a wyvern, not a..." She trailed off with a sigh. "You'd know best I suppose."

He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes, like he could push the images away somewhere to the back of his head where he didn't have to watch them replayed. "It... it swallowed her down and she..."

Mother Vinegar cut him off with a sharp laugh. "She stuck in its craw, same as she does in mine. I can just see it now."

When Kagan looked up in surprise, the old woman held up the ruins of Orsina's garb. "She's a year on, but her cloak still has the burns, tooth-cuts and slobber." She sighed and looked down at Orsina, laying still as the dead. "You stupid, stupid girl."

With laborious effort, Kagan made his way back to his feet and hauled the door back into place. "What was she meant to do, die?"

When he looked back, the old woman was wrapping her apprentice up in furs with her eyes pressed shut. "Better she had."

Each step seemed to drain his strength more and more. It was a wonder he could even stand, let alone plod back to fall beside the fire with a groan. It was not hot enough. It was never hot enough here in the forest, even an inch from the flame he could feel the cold and the damp encroaching. He missed feeling the fire inside him. Feeling the life of the dragon he'd pinned his heart to flowing back and forth between them without halt. Too many years, he'd been cold. Today was the closest he'd come to warmth and it had almost killed him. "What can we do for her?"

“Do for her? Nothing. She’s done for herself.” The old woman flopped down right alongside Kagan, rustling in her aprons for a briarwood pipe and the twist of foul black-spiced pig-tail tobacco she favoured. “There’ll be no coming back from this. It’s beyond my skill.”

He closed his eyes. It was what Kagan had expected to hear, but he still regretted hearing it. “So she’s going to die, after all that?”

“Die? I wish the world was so kindly. No boy. She’ll live. Our little bear will live. The burns healed fast with a shade sucking her dry, bruises and bites too. The rest is exhaustion. She gave too much. A year or more. Gone like that.” She snatched a burning stick from the fire and lit her pipe. “She’ll live the rest of her life knowing how that felt. Knowing all that power was there at her beck and call, and all it would cost her was a little bit of herself.”

She blew out a long plume of green smoke. “She’ll live, but she’ll regret every minute of it.”

Kagan was about to say that he didn’t see how bad that could be, then he remembered what it felt like to fly. To know, he’d never fly again. “It was my fault. If I’d wondered for just a bit longer what could have chased a crocorax down. If I’d gone up and looked for smoke. If I’d…”

“No point in all that now.” She held out the pipe to him and he drew in an aching lungful of the foul smoke, regretting the decision the minute he made it. “You said yourself, nobody could have known. Nobody could’ve expected. What’s done is done. But you’re not done doing.”

The old woman’s voice grew fainter, softer, whether it was exhaustion overtaking Kagan, or the old woman taking care not to wake her ward, he couldn’t say. “She’ll need a teacher. Now that she’s tasted it. There’ll be no keeping her out of their business.”

He glanced sideways at her. The light dimming. “She’s got you.”

“Me?” She let out a bitter bark of laughter. “I’ve had sense enough through all my years to keep the shades out. Nothing I can teach her.”

Kagan feigned amazement. “By the burned god, did Mother Vinegar just admit that she couldn’t do something?”

She whacked him with the back of her hand as he chuckled. “You’re not so big I can’t put you over my knee for a paddling, boy.”

The laughter trailed off. “So where’s she going then?”

The old woman sighed so long Kagan feared she might deflate entirely. “Covotana. Nest of weasels that it is, they’re still the only folk with a school for her kind.”

“Long walk.” Orsina looked so small now she was sleeping. Out in the woods she’d strode like a giant, but here he’d always see the little girl.

“Aye well, good thing she’s young and you’re used to it.”

It took him a moment to register her words. “Me? You want me to take her? You think I hide in the woods for the fun? They’ll gut me, skin me and sell me as a rug.”

She shrugged. "Pull your hood up."

"Pull my... They kill my people on sight." The growl was back in his voice now he'd found some anger to hold onto. "I'll be strung up from a tree."

"Good reason to get away from the woods then."

He was almost roaring, "You cannot seriously be asking me to..."

"Asking? Boy, when have I ever asked a thing. I'm telling." She snapped around to glower at him. All the weight of her years bearing down on him in that one stare. "That girl is going to wake up, and you're going to walk her out of these woods and we're never going to see hide nor hair of her again, all because you couldn't see a dragon six feet from your face."

The guilt was an unnecessary twist of the knife, but Mother Vinegar had never been one to use a half dose when there was enough for the full one.

"You just said..."

She snapped. "I said you'll take the girl to her teachers, carry a letter along too for introductions. You'll do it, and you'll do it without a word of complaint, or I'll be the one with a new rug."