

The Hollow North
Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112

Kagan could not ride a horse. They felt wrong beneath his legs, too narrow, too soft. He rode too far forward, flung over its neck, bearing too much weight down on it, as if afraid of low branches or the whipping wind. The hunting party had three destriers large enough to bear him, and each day he was switched to another as they began to suffer under his misplaced weight. He tried to sit back, prim and proper and upright like the soldiers all about him, but by the end of each day he was slung low all over again.

Still, it was as close to flight as he had come in many a year, and if the price was the discomfort of a few horses pressing in on his empathy as he rode, then he'd suffer it. For a time after he'd left the dungeons, and the tortures and suffering inflicted all about him, Kagan had felt nothing. His empathy was numbed to the point of withering by all that he'd suffered, and all that those around him had been suffering alongside him, but now, with the wind brushing over his face, he could feel again.

Strength had taken time to return. Almost a week of rest and supping on the finest food that Covotana could offer before he was even introduced to the people he would be commanding into perpetuity.

At a glance they seemed unlikely huntsmen, mostly noble bastards and third sons fallen on hard times, but gradually he came to recognise the value in them as they talked, and as he watched the way they moved. They did not have his natural grace in the woods, but they had a poacher's wit to them. Eyes ever darting, feet softly placed so they could feel what was beneath them before they put down their weight. It was strange to watch them about in the courtyards of Covotana, passing over the gardener's carefully raked stones without leaving footprints and pinching snacks from the servant's trays when they glanced away without disrupting the balance. In the city their skills were turned to play, they were like jesters for the folks without their skills and they seemed to revel in the attention.

Out here on the open roads of Espher, they had avoided attention with the same diligence. It did not matter that this was land ruled by their liege, or that the peasants they passed by so carefully would have readily leapt aside at their approach were they showing their colours. They did their jobs well. Far too well for mere huntsmen.

It was known that Kagan had lived and hunted in the north, by the foot of the steppes where the most dangerous of prey came down to ravage the outlying villages. It was known, because he'd shared tales of his work once he'd finally clawed his way back up to some semblance of sanity. Words still did not come easily to him, but they came. Just as his memories crept back now and again, the long nights in the dark, stone pressing down above him. The voice of that little girl he'd known calling out and offering him salvation. After he finally understood what was happening, he had asked after Orsina. Asked after the lordling who'd come and spoken up for him too. Neither one was anywhere to be found. Both were meant to be students at the school for necromancers, but both had departed, last sighted at the hearing that bought him his freedom. They were out of the city, supposedly. Though Kagan could not have guessed where.

There were a great many questions still hanging over him from that day before Espher's king, and no hint of gossip from the servants did much to sate his curiosity. Volpe, last of the old king's line. Orsina,

some country lady he'd taken under his wing. Not a ward, not a proposal yet, but there were rumours. Endless rumours. He'd never have guessed Orsina had the talent for talk that might have won her some near-royal brat's favour, if anything, he'd expected her to be outcast within a week given the way she'd always talked to him, but if she was willing to flex that newfound influence to save him, then he was delighted to have misjudged her.

They made camp under the stars each night though he would have expected men like these to seek the comfort of a roadhouse or inn, and while the hunters he was meant to lead set about raising tents, he declined them. Preferring nothing between him and the open sky. As the stars watched over him, he felt life creeping back into his body. Arazi were made of sterner stuff than unbonded humans, so the chill of the night didn't trouble him, not that there was much chill now that high summer was coming on. Were he home, beyond the steppes, Kagan would have stripped down to just his leathers, letting the sun warm his skin everywhere scales shone through, but he was not, and he did what he could not to draw notice, even from the men who were meant to obey his commands.

There did not seem to be much in the way of discipline among these men, every one was a puffed up noble or hanger-on quite certain of their own superiority, and he had expected them to chafe at having a stranger, a foreigner, set above them, yet all of them seemed oddly content to follow the few commands he felt the need to give. Perhaps when they came upon the edge of the Selvaggia, and his expertise was required more and more often, they would learn to respect him instead of obeying with a pantomime of deference. It mattered little either way, so long as they obeyed, and he could do his duty.

It sat strange on him, this new duty. An ill-fitting cloak cast over shoulders that had been too long bare. Little was asked of him as the King's huntsman, even this little outing was more of an exercise than a true hunt. It seemed that the Cerva had little hunger for blood nor interest in menageries. It begged the question of why they'd keep huntsmen in their household, but given all that Kagan had now seen, he imagined that the answer would be tradition. There seemed a thousand little titles and jobs to be doled out as rewards or punishments in Espher, and the fact that his role was mostly vestigial suited him well. Peace in the city, and the hunt when without it. That was a life he could find comfort in. It would never be the same as the freedom he'd once known, but it was tolerable.

The journey that had taken a season on foot with the girl in tow took five days, and the pace felt leisurely.

As the Selvaggia rose on the distant horizon, Kagan felt an ache in his chest that he had not expected. They would skirt it, heading eastward away from the parts he preferred to roam, but he was still surprised by how much this patch of nothing and trees felt like home to him. Another place that he'd never thought to see again.

That night he made the men reset their camp further back from the trees, and he set a watch for the first time since they'd left Covotana. Not a one of the men seemed to believe that it was needed, but he supposed that they had not lived here and risked all that he had to pass safely beneath the moss-laden boughs. At the periphery of his senses, like an itch that he could not scratch, Kagan felt beasts stirring within the forest.

He could not say if they were dragon-kin, but there was an intelligence there, a depth of emotion that the native beasts lacked. Something down from the steppes. Bloodied and hungering for more. Not a full

blooded dragon, not by any stretch. Two running free down here in one lifetime would have pushed even his credulity passed its limit.

All night, as the soft men settled to drink and chatter among themselves about the fire, Kagan sat in watch. They had looked askance to him as they made their campfire, wondering if he meant to snatch even this comfort from them, but he did not object. There were plenty of things in the woods that feared flame and plenty more that he could not see without some light brighter than the crescent of the moon. Things that he did not want to come upon him in the night.

Though Kagan had set a watch, he did not trust in human eyes, so he kept company with whichever hunter had drawn the short straw. Some attempted to speak with him in soft whispers, others kept entirely to their duties. Neither drew much response from him. One particularly foppish stalker who's name Kagan still could not recall began regaling him with the stories of his time poaching in the Cerva's lands. The bright plumage of the birds there, and what they'd fetch from the hatmakers of Covotana. Kagan could scarcely believe any man, even one born in so degenerate a place as Espher would so readily admit to such treasonous acts as stealing game from the crown's lands, yet this man wore his crimes like a badge of pride. Even bragging that he'd never have been brought into the King's service if not for his talent with a snare and a spate of bad luck.

On and on his stories went, grating at Kagan's nerves until with a start he realised that this fool was trying to ingratiate himself. These were the bragging stories that had won this man his friends, and he was trying to win Kagan over. Just that realisation was enough to shake the Arazi for a moment. How long had it been since anyone felt the need to ingratiate themselves to him, since he had political power enough for it to be worthwhile? It was distraction enough that he did not see the motion by the treeline until it was already too late to call out.

His own armament had vanished somewhere in the depths of the dungeons of Covotana, and there was no craftsman in Espher that made spears balanced for throwing. Given time he could have made his own again, but they had not been near a forest in all their journey, nor a smithy.

What he had was a recurve bow. It had been so long since he'd used one that it sat clumsy in his hands, the tension of the string on his finger almost hurt. But when his elbow rose behind his head, the tail-feathers came level to his eye, and the wood began to hum with tension, he remembered.

The first shot hit the wyvern low, under the eye, at the side of it's jaw. It must have hurt, but it didn't slow the beast a step. The second hit off the beak doing no harm. It was only when the third arrow struck it in the eye that the wild charge from the shadows became a stumble and tumble to a halt.

His previously vociferous companion only just managed to mumble out, "I didn't even see it."

Kagan was already stalking forward, a fresh arrow already drawn in case of twitching. "That's why I waited up."

The supposed hunter did not move forward with him as he should have, to secure the prey. Instead he stayed safe and distant with his back to the fire. Raising his voice to be heard over the distance. "I didn't know they moved that fast."

Some of the others began to stir at the raised voices, but Kagan had eyes only for the wyvern. Arrow point still levelled at it, steps slow and careful. There was no sign of movement, no sign of breath being

drawn. Still he did not loosen his draw, turning instead to cover the tree-line while he crouched by the beast's side and took it in.

There was such beauty in this fallen monster that it caught in Kagan's throat. Feathers and scales blended seamlessly in a rich deep blue that made it almost invisible in the moonlight. Behind the beak, two solid plates of bone extended beneath the bared scales, protection for the brain nestled behind from the gruesome impacts that a strike with the beak would unleash. Where wings should have sprouted from its shoulders, there were vestigial humps that the wyvern could have drawn back along its ribs to pass through tight spaces or speed its course, or expanded out from its body to appear larger and startle off predators. It was full grown, despite standing only a little taller than Kagan at the shoulders, one of the lesser breeds that his people had not even troubled to tame for the most part. Even flightless wyvern were rare this far south, Kagan had seen only a handful since he'd come down to these lowlands, and even those had been the wounded and the dying, fleeing from predation by the healthy and hungry, in desperate search of respite. Between this and the aslinda-dragon he'd crossed paths with the previous year, it was becoming abundantly clear that something was truly awry on the steppes. The only dragon-kin found there were the outcasts and the ferals, and to see even those few stragglers driven off, it made Kagan wonder what could be disrupting things so badly.

Little in the way of sleep followed for the rest of that night, so Kagan and his merry band set about stripping the feathers and scales that they could carry. By rights the kill was his, but it was good practice to have the men at your back holding sharp objects indebted to you, so he shared the prize. The meat they strung out to dry, but Kagan doubted they'd pass back this way to claim it before another predator found its way up to the ropes strung from branch to branch.

With dawn they set off north once more. His instruction had been to skirt the steppes, seeking out signs of any troublesome beasts. In essence he was set to tour the essentially abandoned border territories and report if they'd been overrun by wolves in the absence of governance. It seemed a good use of his talents, so he had obeyed.

Yet as the Selvaggia spread wilder and wilder and the ground beneath the horses hooves became ever more rocky, there seemed to be no intent among his companions of turning aside. On they went to the north, until plateaus began to jut up and they found themselves passing through shallow valleys between them. Shade covered them all until midday had it peering straight down at them out of the strip of blue sky overhead, and only then did their pace begin to slow. Kagan was looking around for a natural ramp, having no desire to abandon the horses down here for a hard climb. "We need to get higher if we want to see anything."

"Ah well, that would also allow us to be seen, would it not?" The fop piped up.

Kagan gave him a blank stare. "Do you fear the beasts of the steppes so much you don't even dare to look at them? Is this the courage of the men of Espher?"

Another piped up. "It's a hot day, maybe we go up when the sun's down to take a peek, eh?"

"Perhaps we'll find a better spot, further in." Said another, one who'd stayed blessedly silent until now. It seemed the full dozen men at Kagan's side had an opinion on where they should be going next. Almost like they'd already discussed it without him.

“What’s going on?” He eased his hand away from his weapons as he turned to face them, showing both of them on the reins.

“Whatever do you mean, sir?” Fop was sweating, Kagan hadn’t expected a liar like that to be so easily rattled. “We’re just making suggestions for an easier passage.”

Kagan drew up his horse entirely and turned it cross-wise to the path. If it came to fighting, it would make a solid shield against their first volley. “Look, I’m here now, I’ll do whatever we need to do, just tell me what is going on. I’m not like you, I’ve no patience for secrets.”

Looks were exchanged among the men, and gradually, as he watched, the fops and fools who’d been flouncing around Covotana seemed to fade into seasoned men of the land. Their prim upright seating became a slouch, ready to drop low. The fop became the poacher he’d bragged of being right before Kagan’s eyes. All pretensions melted. “We’re scouting for an army coming south. Dragon lords. Weren’t sure how you’d take that.”

Kagan let out a sigh. “Wish you’d the sense to tell me that sooner.”

“So you could have turned tail?” Eyes were narrowed all about him.

“So we could have done this right.”

That was enough to knock the wind out of their wings. “What?”

“You don’t bring animals to hunt dragons. You don’t move in packs. You check which way the wind is flowing. You... If they’re within ten miles, we’re already fucked.”

Their arrogance may have been a mask over their true nature as scouts for the Espher army, but there was a seed of truth in it. One of the quiet ones was rolling his eyes. “What are you...”

“What is the point of bringing me if you aren’t going to listen? We need to pull back. We need to find someplace secure for the horses, then we need to talk about how dragons hunt, and how Arazi can sense you from miles off, even if you don’t make a sound or come in sight.” Kagan could not help himself now that he knew what was happening, his eyes kept turning up to the blue strip of sky above them, just waiting for a shadow to pass, and a flame to follow. “Turn us around. Now.”

“You’re just trying to get us away before we spot them.” One of the quiet ones called back to his fellows. “This is all a farce.”

“I’m an exile, you halfwit. Wherever a dragon’s shadow is cast the land belongs to the Arazi. They could have claimed all the steppes by now. The worst they’ll do is kill you. If they catch me on Arazi land it will make your little dungeon back in Covotana look like a country estate orgy. We need to move.”

For a long languorous moment, none of them did. Nobody spoke and nobody moved, until the poacher reared his horse up to spin her in the tight confines of the gully. “If he wanted us gone, he could have let the wyvern eat us. Let’s go.”

There seemed to be no ranks among them, no hierarchy at all, yet when the poacher spoke, they listened. Even the ones who’d been decrying him as their nemesis a moment before had changed their tune now.

All the day's slow and steady progress was abandoned and they took off at a trot, as fast as they dared in these tight corridors of risen sandstone. It was enough to make the broad-shouldered Kagan snarl with irritation. This passage was cut wide enough for Arazi to ride three abreast, but these fools had such little control over their mounts they had to leave a margin for error wide enough to be all their graves. He had no such impediment.

Letting his emotions loose, he fed his fear down into the beast below him, threaded it through with his desire to be away. He blinkered the horse with his own focus, they needed out. They needed out into the open where they could run free. A horse understood that terror, that need not to be penned in, beneath the tortures that Espher had used to break them and make them obedient, their natures still persisted, both mount and rider, they needed space about them to feel alive.

Kagan burst past the others as they trotted along, first at a canter then a full on gallop as they rounded a bend and into a straight run passage back towards the green land beyond the steppes. Still he could not stop himself from twisting around, looking back, looking up, and it seemed that those who rode in his wake had been afflicted with the same habits. Every one of them rode like a true hunter now, but everyone was so distracted by their own impending doom that the marked improvement in their skills was unnoticeable.

When at last they burst out from amidst the high walls into the steppes foothills, there was a palpable relief. They slowed their pace, spared their horses the spurs and wondered for a moment that Kagan had not. How could he, when he felt that itching presence at the back of his mind, warning him, as it would be warning the Arazi in flight, that another of his kind was nearby?

At first it was just the faintest brush of the empathic sense over them, the emotions of the riders and horses both burning bright enough to catch on the periphery as they stretched in search of prey, then a tighter focus as they were felt. As they were recognised.

The only thing that Kagan could offer to his followers in the way of protection was a bellow back.
"Faster! They're coming!"

Huntsmen or scouts, it mattered little, they spun in circles on their horses, trying to sight something that was still over the horizon. Looking for their doom instead of fleeing it. If they saw a dragon in the sky, it was already too late for them all.

The Selvaggia had been Kagan's sanctuary for decades, and now he rode hard for it once more. Lather slicking the sides of his horse as it staggered on. There was life enough there to confuse Arazi senses, a density of beasts and the dull ache of slow moving emotion from the woods themselves. He could feel his mount's exhaustion, feel it weakening and breaking, he felt that pain as though it were his own, but still he pushed it on. He could almost justify it to himself because he was feeling the horse's pain. He could pretend that he was driving the both of them to the edge of death. There was the perfect justification in the logical human parts of his mind; they would both die if they were caught out here in the dragon's sight. Yet how could a horse understand that? Instead he fed it fear, snippets from his own memories, of being stalked, of being chased. It ran and ran until the legs beneath it broke, and even then it would have tried to go on if Kagan hadn't leapt clear.

In a broken heap it lay braying and bucking, still trying to move, still trying to flee. He could not spare the moment to put it out of its misery, but neither could he run on still feeling it's pain. His bow was crushed

beneath its bulk, but there was ever a knife at his belt, and with a wash of calming feelings, Kagan stilled the beast long enough to drive the tip of the blade home behind its jaw. He felt the blood spilling, the sharp pain at his throat, the heat rushing over his hand. He felt it, and then he closed himself off to it so that the waiting darkness could not swallow him down too.

With his empathy snapped shut, he could not feel the scouts racing to him or the dragon and rider. Only his eyes and ears availed him, and compared to the usual cornucopia of senses at his disposal it was like looking at the world through the eye of a needle. At least blinkered so, he could concentrate on the path ahead of him.

Tucking his head down and letting the weight of his broad body rock forwards, he ran.

The hoof-beats of his scouts drew closer, but he fled them as though they were the enemy. All energy directed forward. If the dragon lord saw them, the forest could not save them. Under the cover of the woods and the many tangled emotions of the beasts within there was a hope that the soaring scout might consider that there empathy was confused, but with any glimpse of these men, death was sure to follow. What protection was a forest canopy from a creature that could breathe fire?

Was it hoof drumming or distant wing-beats? Would they live, or would they die? Kagan could not say, and he dared not slow, even as his lungs burned and his saddle-sore legs ached. The horsemen rode on right by him, and he would have knocked them away if they'd tried to hoist him up into their saddles. He was so intent on his desperate sprint that he didn't even notice when the blue sky gave away to filtered green light and the open plane narrowed down to twisting forest paths. Bursting into a lightning-struck clearing, he found the men scrambling down off their horses, gasping as though they'd been the ones to run. "Strip them, swiftly. If we set them loose on the plain the rider might mistake them for the sign that drew him south."

"Abandon the horses?" The one Kagan judged to be youngest finally found his voice.

"They won't outrun a dragon in flight, but they might spare us." The men went on staring at him blankly before he barked. "Move."

Whatever else these scouts or spies may have been, at some time they were soldiers. They could feel the pressure of an order, and when they had no thoughts of their own, their bodies moved to obey. Every trace of civilisation was cut from the horses, their supplies, their tack, only the shoes on their feet were left, and Kagan could only hope they were dulled enough that from the sky they wouldn't be seen.

For a moment he let his empathy leap out of his skull once more, feeling everything all around him, feeling the terror just lurking beneath the careful training of the horses. He poured his own heart-pounding dread in, and the banked fear overran them. They took off for the open air, where they might run free, every one following the one ahead as herd instinct took hold and they followed the leader.

Kagan turned to the men, low laden with their own gear and looking much worse for wear. "Now spread out, arm yourselves and think happy thoughts."

Poacher piped up. "You're joking."

Kagan ignored him as best he could. "Meet me back here in an hour if you're still alive. You've all had enough training to find your way about the woods?"

Again the poacher tried to interrupt, "Yes, but..."

"If you've got gods, pray to them. If you've a woman, think of her. Whatever you can do to still your minds and calm your feelings. They'll be how the Arazi find us."

The young one spoke softly still, despite how raggedly his breath came. "What happens if we can't?"

"The forest burns, we all die, you learn an important lesson about telling me things before it is too late." There was no point in coating the truth in sugar. Chances were they were already dead. At least if he burned to death down here they wouldn't take him alive.

At least some of the men had a hint of practicality to them. "How far do we spread?"

"Far as you can go and make it back in time, avoid the beasts you can, climb trees, most of the creatures out here cannot climb."

They broke apart, dumping what gear they could afford to lose, and shifting what they couldn't into their bags as they went. The only one who still wanted to hang around for a chat was the poacher, who Kagan finally turned to face. The little fop asked, "Most?"

"Yes, most. Now do you need me to hold your hand? Wipe your arse for you?" Kagan growled. "Run."

Kagan took his own advice before waiting to see if the boy had obeyed. The further they were spread out, the less of a beacon they'd be to their hunter, and the more the ambient life of the forest would mask them. He pulled his empathy tight in against him, and then surprised himself by whispering out a little prayer to the Burned. It had been so long since he'd spoken his own tongue that it felt thick in his mouth, the weight of it so different from the flighty words of Espher. Yet for all that, it calmed him.

These woods were not the ones he had once stalked so bravely, but they were close enough to feel like home and with the hallowed words spilling forth from him like a guttural hum, Kagan felt as close to calm as he ever had without a dragon beneath him. He could only pray it would be enough.

In the distance, the horses began to scream.

He could not think about it, nor the volume that they had to be shrieking at to be heard through the muffling of the wood. They had to be terrified. Even with the push of fear that he'd given them, they had not made a sound above a whinny. Mortal terror must sound like that screaming. If Kagan reached out to them through his empathy then he would know just how bad things were, but he could not. He must not. He had to deny everything that he was and keep his head down to avoid the low hanging mosses of the Selvaggia.

When the screaming stopped, it was not a slow quieting as the horses fled, it was instant. One moment they screamed, the next there was a soft thump, and then silence. It took but a moment for the wave of heat to pass through the trees and wash over Kagan's scaled skin. All of summer come at once.

He shivered in anticipation.

It should have been fear, it should have been dread, to be so close to the destructive force of a dragon's breath once more, but he could not shake his memories. The rush of land beneath them, the gorge rising in his throat as they made their dive and venom poured forth. The sweet sting as the flame caught.

Dropping to his knees, Kagan scabbled his way to a bush, forcing his way under, hiding from the sky, trying to slow his hammering heart, trying to calm his bloodlust. The bloodlust that he could not say was truly his.

He truly thought that it had worked. That he might survive. Then he heard it. The beating of wings above him. The rhythmic thud, and the shiver of leaves as the wind swept down through them.