

**The Pyre of Hope**  
***Caldo, Regola Dei Cerva 112***

The Selvaggia burned. The moss was dry from the summer heat, and it was as rife to burn as paper. The woods were old, and for every living branch there were dead and dry ones aplenty. The undergrowth that had always plagued Kagan's passage was tinder. He ran and he ran with the hot air burning at his lungs and sparks raining down about him.

The dragon had passed over him, it had passed him over, curled up and cowering, then just as he felt that he might breath again, the roar of flames had come. He had trained all of his life to control his emotions. The scouts had not.

They had broken under the shadow of the dragon. They had run. They had died.

Water flowed in narrow channels through the forest, sometimes joining together into something like a river, but more often just trickles. They were not enough of a barrier to the spreading fire. Not when there hadn't been rain up on the steppes in so long and they were barely a muddy mouthful to be had. They would not save Kagan. They might kill him though, just one turn of his ankle and this wild flight through the burning forest was over. The sun was long gone, blocked out by the smoke trapped beneath the canopy, a thick acrid cloud that would not rise until the leaves had seared away or the charcoaled trees had fallen. He could not breathe it, but that mattered little to one who had ridden on a dragon's back. He had soared through smoke such as this so many times he did not even have to think of holding his breath now, only on his destination.

He fled west. To go north would bring him closer to the dragon lord's scouts and ensure certain death, to flee back east out of the woods would have put him into the open, and at risk of the very same scout who had set the world aflame spotting him. You did not set a forest alight to kill the people within it, you set it alight to drive them out. Kagan would not be driven out, he would not be picked off as he fled. He'd rather burn that give them the opportunity.

Strange as it was to him, he was lost. He knew which way was west, and he headed for it with all speed, following whatever trails were still clear, racing the flames to gulp down fresh air before it caught up to him and gulped it down, but beyond that, he could not have said where in the great forest he was. All of the landmarks he had used to guide him were gone. Changed with the seasons or disrupted by the fire. It was like he had never been here before, though the earth beneath him was familiar and the trees twisted in patterns he thought he could recall, like the shapes of clouds he'd once passed by, now lost to memory.

Outrunning the fire was a foolish dream, if he were to be honest with himself. Though his breath would hold longer than any plain human's it still wouldn't outlast the distance between one end of the great forest and the other, eventually he would need to draw breath, and eventually the smoke would get him.

Leaping a fallen log and landing amidst a tangle of brambles that were still blessedly unburnt, Kagan crushed down his fear. It did not matter that he felt it, but he could not let anyone else feel it. He had to run as though this were nothing at all, as if it were just a turn around the training yard. Half of his

attention was on his feet, half on his heart, trying to keep all that he felt from singing out. It was the kind of divided attention he could blame all of his stumbles on. It also explained why he came bursting out beneath the open sky without even realising it was ahead.

Blue opened up above him, threatening to swallow him whole. His head snapped back and he dragged in the clean air. The smoke billowed up in a wall behind him reaching up as high as he could see. Blocking him from the sight of anything flying over the flames.

If it were him, that was where he'd have kept his dragon hovering, riding the thermals, resting so that when the time came to swoop down on prey, it was primed and ready. Maybe whoever was up there had not been so well trained, but he doubted it.

The opening that he'd sprung into showed signs of new growth all over, but it had clearly been burnt not so long ago. There were still fallen trees turned to black amidst the fresh grass. It was a straight line, cut across the woods. Impossibly straight. No lightning strike or forest fire could have burned a clean strip like this. It was a fire break. Someone had deliberately cut back the forest and burned the rest so that summer fires could not spread. Someone was caring for his woods, even though he was gone.

His first thought was that it was Mother Vinegar, saving his backside again, but she wouldn't have had the physical strength to do this. It was a mystery for later, he had to run, there was no guarantee that the rider above wouldn't take a turn this way and spot him if he lingered too long.

The rich green of the woods on the far side beckoned to him like a lover's embrace, the cool of the shade seemed to radiate, he could already feel the relief before he'd closed the distance.

Bursting into the undergrowth, feeling thorns tug at him and the cool dark of the Selvaggia envelop him once more, Kagan could hardly believe that he'd missed these discomforts. Yet here he was grinning as wide as a buffoon as he ripped through the greenery.

He had done the impossible and he had survived, and that made him feel joy like he hadn't since he was last soaring through the air. He'd outrun a dragon in flight. He had barely made it six feet into the dark and soothing woods before the empathy that he'd dragged back in to reach no further than his skin pulsed out and detected the people surrounding him.

They had not been lying in wait, they were not tensed for battle, they were simply waiting for the idiot who had made such a horrific noise running through the woods to come into their midst so they could close in behind him. If it were just the humans, he would have tried his luck. He had his knife, he had the woods he'd known for decades. The wyverns that were bonded to them, those he would not dare to fight without preparation.

They were wingless Arazi cavalry, not so different from the wild beast he'd felled to the east, but with all the cunning and planning that a connection to a human mind granted them. The bond was a two-way street. The wyverns and the dragons gained as much from their riders as the riders from their steeds.

As the Arazi slipped out from among the trees, Kagan bent over to put his hands on his knees and catch his breath. If it came to a fight, he would not fall without blood being spilled, but for that, he needed to breathe.

The first words in his own tongue that he'd heard in so long, and he could not understand them. Could not hear them over the pounding of his hearts in his ears. He growled back, "What?"

She hissed back. "Where is your mount?"

He let some small part of his anguish slip loose from beneath his smothering control. "She fell. Trapped."

It was not easy to lie to Arazi, most never even attempted it. How could you lie to someone who knew the truth in your heart? As it turned out, it was mostly about feeling the right things at the right time. Was the relief he'd felt as he broke free of the burning woods because of his own struggle to escape the fire, or because he recognised the firebreak as a sign that help was close by. Was his fear, running through the woods, because of the dragon overhead, or the one that he'd left pinned somewhere in a crash. It took an expert to discern such fine detail from empathy, and most warriors never troubled to train beyond ensuring that their bond was secure. Kagan supposed that he would not have tried to hone the edge of his own connection if he'd been linked to an idiot beast like those now peering out from behind the trees with their feathers flared.

Still using his panting as an excuse, and his panic as a mask, Kagan choked out. "Go. Please. Help."

If there were strings on an Arazi's heart to be plucked, then the image of a rider and dragon separated, with one hurt, was the surest way to strum them. All but the closest of the gathered scouts took off with all haste towards the burning woods. Kagan counted off the six of them, each leaping to kick off a tree, springing into the air, and their wyverns simply knowing where to be to catch them in their stirrups. It sent a pang of pain through Kagan to see. A pang that he saw them all flinch as they felt. That loss. That knowing that he would never experience such harmony again. They set off with all speed, slung low over their beast's backs so that the burning branches could not catch them.

Kagan felt the thunder of clawed feet through the earth, he felt the heat as it struck their faces, he felt their determination to do whatever they could to save the fallen dragon, no matter the cost. He felt it grow weaker and weaker the further they travelled, as he stood there folded over and panting for breath so he did not need to look the Arazi who had stayed behind in the eye. Still the woman tried to speak with him. "I do not know you, which clan are you from?"

Kagan opened his mouth to lie, but he knew his heart would betray him. "No clan."

She blew out a snort of disbelief. "No clan, and bonded to an aslinda-dragon?"

The patterns of his scales, the changes in his build, all of these things would have given him away. He could not pass for any of the lesser riders. He was a dragon lord, through and through.

"No clan, and bonded to an aslinda-dragon." He echoed it back, nodding his head slowly, keeping an eye on her feet. In Espher men bragged of knowing a foe's next move from the look in their eyes. Arazi were more practical, if her stance changed, he'd charge her.

There were dragon lords outside the clans, though they were few and far between. Most of them remnants of families exterminated in the interminable civil wars before the Arazi unification. Some of them warriors of great valour, who had caught some greater clan's eye, and been offered a bond with their brood in the hope that it would draw that hero into the fold.

Kagan was neither lonely scion or hero. He was the only other kind of clan-less dragon lord. The only one in the world that he knew of, for no other dragon lord had ever committed a crime so despicable in all of their history. But of course he did not announce this. She moved in closer, but her stance was still open, she was still calm. The last hints of the others faded at the periphery of his fully extended perception.

He held out his hand to her, and without hesitation she took it, pulling him back up to his full height. The knife came up, under her chin, through the tongue and soft palate to pierce her brain. Blood ran from her nose, from her mouth. She had trusted him, held herself open to him. He was a murderer now, truly.

The wyvern bucked as the blade slipped home. Then all the coiled strength in its body was unleashed in every direction at once. Every muscle spasmed, every organ failed. This was the true face of death, so often hidden by the damage that was dealt to bring it on. The body being abandoned by whatever force animated it.

Kagan did not deserve to look at either one of the bodies as he stripped them of their spears and whatever gear might serve him best in the coming flight. He had only minutes at best before the other scouts returned from their fruitless search. He did not have time for grief and sorrow, only for the hunt. That he was the prey this time around mattered little. The motion was the same. The heightened awareness of all about him, the chase, the adrenaline, and the blur of trees as he ran for his life.

No more did he flee the flames, he angled southbound now, away from the ever present danger of whatever army lay in the steppes biding their time and hoping for more familiar territory somewhere over Espher's hazy border. There was no point in trying to hide his trail or confuse them as to which way he had gone, there could be no deception in this, they would feel him regardless, all that he had on his side was time and distance. The two things that their mounts could snatch from him in moments.

They were too far away for him to tell when they'd lost faith in him, and come to doubt that there was a downed dragon amidst the burning woods. He was too far away to feel such small emotions as confusion, irritation, mounting suspicion and fear. He was not too far to feel the pang of grief and betrayal when they found their kinswoman lying dead. It was an icicle through his heart. His step did not falter though. If anything it made him quicken. They would be coming for him now.

Wyvern calls rang through the forest, high and clacking as their beaks snapped shut and open. Shrill and trilling. Kagan was too far to hear them, but through his empathy, he felt them, felt the rage for vengeance. Their shrieks were how anger felt to him, even now.

The forest grew drier as he went further south, the off-run from the steppes gone and only the deep pools that persisted all year around still sunk into the stones and roots. The places where once he'd picked up the trails of his prey. The one place that he had always avoided, at Mother Vinegar's command. Now he knew where he was, he headed for it, there was no way that he could outpace the wyvern forever, but there was no doubt that he could run them in circles using what he knew of this place. The hidden channels beneath the brambles that the snowmelt had dug through loose soil. The gullies that would hide him from sight as he crossed back behind their lines. The trees that stood so tall he could climb right up past the canopy and look out all the way to the steppes themselves.

He had no chance at any of those things when the first of them came upon him.

Good distance had been made, but he had found none of his clever tricks before the leader of the pack came at him. Bursting out from amidst the trees. The wyvern leapt for him, back legs up to rake him into pieces. It was caught up in the same blood frenzy as its master. Kagan did not flee or falter, he dove under the talons and rolled back to his feet, all the spears about him clattering together like the forest was chattering its teeth.

Back on his feet he drew back his arm to throw, and he saw the scout twisted in his seat, ready to do the very same. One of them was bonded to a wyvern, one of them was a dragon-lord. The difference showed. Kagan had no moment of hesitation. The javelin took the boy from his stirrups, smashing his back off a tree as he fell. The wyvern bucked and snapped and fell to the dirt in sympathy before Kagan had even drawn back the next spear to put it down. One thrust to the rider's heart and the battle was won. Then Kagan took to his heels once more.

That had been luck as much as skill, and he felt short on both commodities by this point. His training might have been better, but he was not sharp, he'd spent lifetimes dawdling through these woods, playing at a peaceful life when he was born to wage war. If he'd ever thought the Arazi would come south, he would never have stayed here, he would have plied his huntsman's trade abroad, or joined a mercenary company and travelled the world. Just the thought of putting yet more distance between himself and home had galled him then, but now he wondered if this hadn't been his suicide attempt. Waiting to die by the only hands he could accept death from.

The ground became sucking and damp as he neared the forbidden pool, the strands of thorned creepers hanging low would have caught in hair if he had any, they'd drag the Arazi from their saddles if they were fool enough to charge in. Kagan wondered for a few steps if he should lie here in wait rather than risk so much, but he could not. Not with so many still chasing him.

Eleven cavalry scouts left of the initial hunting-wing. More than Kagan would have deployed just to pick through a forest for traps. Add in the firebreak, and it seemed obvious to him they were establishing a forward camp in the Selvaggia to strike out from, and to position flanking troops. Aslinda-dragons had always made up the minority of the Arazi forces, and there was no way that they'd risk them to a forward position like this, which meant that they meant to stage whatever battle was to be waged against Espher in striking distance of this forest.

It presented a two-fold problem. Whoever faced them would have to meet their forces head on here, letting the Arazi choose the field of battle, or split their forces lest they risk the dual terrors of cavalry on the flanks or enemies behind their lines. Or Kagan could die out here, Espher would never know there was a serpent's nest in the Selvaggia and they'd be slaughtered.

When he broke out into the mossy chill about the pool that had always been forbidden, Kagan slowed his wild flight and stopped dead. The water looked lovely deep and still. After the hard day's running through blazing summer heat and forest fire, Kagan could think of nothing more tempting than a dip in that water. To sink down until it closed over his head and he could let the cool sap all his aches away. All of his worries would just melt and he could finally find some rest.

Taking a step closer, he felt as though the water were wrapped around him already. The soft brush of the pond-weed over his scales, tangling around him like he was slipping into a cocoon of comfort and relief.

The spear clipped his ear as it passed. There wasn't much of an ear left to start with after all these years of them smoothing off into his head, but there was enough of a ridge there to catch the tip and tear. Pain flared, and it cut through the muggy fog that had been flooding Kagan's mind. All at once, he realised just how close he was to the water's edge, all at once he realised why this place had been forbidden to him. His enemy had saved him.

Leaping up, Kagan caught a hold onto a solid looking branch and swung himself for the far shore, landing heavily in the bushes there and savouring the sting as their thorns cut into his flesh, pinning his mind in place inside him, keeping outside influences away.

The rider hunting him down had no such protection. Both man and wyvern barrelled straight on into the water, diving as they went. The still water of the pool was thrown into turmoil in their passing. The lily pads atop bucking and rocking and silt thrown up turning the whole pond a murky brown. Kagan began to pull himself free of the thorns, readying himself to run before his hunter could break the surface once more, but he need not have hurried. After a while the rising bubbles stopped and the water began to settle once more to its perfect green stillness.

That more than anything else convinced him that this trap was not worth the risk. To see Arazi taken without even a semblance of a fight, it terrified him.

With each staggering step away from the pool, he felt the mud sucking at his feet more and more, he felt the weight of the world pressing more firmly upon his back. Why couldn't he just stay and rest a while? He'd be safe in the pool, it would protect him from the riders. He clung to the trees as he reached them, using each one to pull himself forward. He could not stop. He would not stop. This pitcher plant would not entice him in.

Gradually the pool's hold loosened on him, and Kagan began to recognise more of the forest around him. This did not feel like a place that he had never been before, this was home. He knew the way each path would weave. When to dip his head beneath a low branch, and when to step over a hidden dip. This was his forest.

He made better time now that he knew the way, but it could never be enough to outpace his pursuers. With each of them that had fallen, he had felt the wave of anguish sweeping out. The other Arazi would have felt it too. They would be coming for him. Closing in from all sides. They might even be ahead for all that he knew, circling back to take him in a pincer.

Here was the tree where he had hung meat out to dry, and here the hollow where he'd waited out a thunderstorm in the midst of a hunt. Here was the rabbit trail he had carried Orsina along on his back when she finally gave up her fear of touching his scales, and here was where he'd first crossed paths with Mother Vinegar in the dead of night as he lay bleeding from a wound to the leg. These things overlaid themselves over his vision like ghosts, but he had no time to remember now. Not when death was coming so fast at his heels.

There was no way to outrun them, and now that they'd felt the death of their kin, they knew just where he was, the only way to turn this battle around was to find some advantage and face them. He needed a defensible position, and all that this forest had to offer was the old hag's cottage. For all that it was ancient and crumbling, it was still stone. They could not come at him from all about, only through the

doorway, one by one. The entry was too tight for the wyvern, he would be taking all their advantages away, all but the exhaustion that they would lack and that he was drowning in.

Despite it all, he couldn't hold back a rumble of laughter. The look on old Mother Vinegar's face when he showed up on her doorstep would make it all worthwhile. In the back of his mind he'd always wondered just what that old witch could really do, when she was pushed and couldn't hide out in the forest and avoid all of her problems. Would he learn the truth of her now? Would he discover that she was Shadebound just like the girl had been, maybe even her great-grandmother, long forgotten but a font for her strange powers?

He crossed into the black once more. The trees were cut down in a line, and beyond that space, fire had taken all. There was no regrowth here, this was not an old stain on the land like the last firebreak, it was a clearance, and the ground had been scorched by something much hotter than mere charcoal burning. He could still taste the tang of dragon venom in the air.

All about where Mother Vinegar had lived was ashes. The blackened stones of her hovel still stood, but they were all that still stood. The plants that had claimed it over centuries were gone. The turf on the roof had collapsed into dust. It was destroyed. From here it was spitting distance to Sheepshank, the closest that Kagan would have come to civilisation in the days before Orsina. There were no trees between here and there, just that long black streak and shining patches where sand in the overturned soil had turned to glass.

The village and its fields were gone. More ash. More toppled stone. They had brought down an aslinda-dragon from the steppes to clear this place of any witnesses to their invasion. Burning hot and fast through all opposition before pulling back out of sight.

Kagan staggered to a halt. All of his hopes burned away as surely as Orsina's parents and the old witch had been.

Such slaughter, just to hide some cavalry in a forest. The worst part was that on the off-chance anyone did come, it would look to their untrained eyes like a forest fire run amok. There would be no warning in this.

The Arazi had always been brutal in their methods, but this was the first time that he was seeing that from the other side. Before it had always been justified. The enemy had chosen death by opposing them, but these peasants had chosen nothing, they were simply in the wrong place. Worse even than this realisation, was the dull knowledge that if it had been commanded of him, he would have readily made that same flight, and burned the same innocents without a second thought.

Instinct had him turn before the wyverns broke free of the woodland cover. As he'd guessed there were some already ahead of him in the southern reach, circling back to cut him off. It didn't matter now. Now they were all out in the open, and he was going to die. He had four spears left, and there were ten of them. They began to close on him, circling around to cut off any escape back into the forest. Mobility remained their great advantage, and exhausted as he was Kagan could not even pretend to match it.

There were tears in the eyes of the one who called out to him. Sorrow was drowning even his rage. Kagan did not know which of the dead had been his lover, but it was certain to be one or the other. "Who are you, murderer?"

There would be no more running or hiding. He was going to die this day as himself again at last. "Kagan the Exile." He beat his fist upon his chest. "This was my forest, those were my people. My friends..."

A ripple of confusion had spread out among the other Arazi as Kagan spoke. They did not know of him. He would have thought that he'd have been a cautionary tale sung to children by now, strange. Another of the riders, a woman with what little hair she had left shaved in harshly in mimicry of the smooth scalps of the true dragon lords. "These are Arazi lands, Exile. You know your punishment."

"I know what's coming." Kagan hefted a spear in his hand. "Do you?"

In the heat of battle, so many things happened at once that it was impossible to keep track of them all. That was the purpose of training, to make a body move before the mind could perceive the threat it moved against.

Three spears launched at Kagan as he leapt aside, launching his own at the weeping Arazi. The first two soared by him, wedging in the ground by the ruins of the witch's cottage. The third was not so over-cast, nor so hasty. It scraped past his leg as he twisted in the air to put all the power of his contortion into the launch. His spear hammered home, not in the chest, but in the weeper's gut. It went deep, until the leather wrapped handle was soaking blood. Nine left.

Rolling back to his feet, Kagan ran. They were ready for him to charge, to use their bodies as shields against their kinsmen's volleys. They were not ready for him to flee. The precious moments it took them to switch their grips on their weapons and ready to throw bought him half the distance to the javelins sticking up out of the ground.

When they launched, they aimed ahead of him, like they'd take a bird in flight. It worked in the air, where every move was a graceful arc, down here in the dirt when Kagan could twist aside and run a different way, it was less effective. Another round of misses, and another near miss, scraping across his back and knocking him off balance as it struck the hafts of the javelins he himself still carried. Splinters rained behind him. No time to worry now.

The stumble saved him from the next launch. One of the fools had charged after him, blocking the line of fire for their kin, but closing the distance enough for them to throw from close-range. It would have taken him through the neck had it not been for the last blow knocking him off kilter. Instead it clipped off his shoulder, and he kept on running.

A dragon perceived the world differently to a man, and some measure of the dragon was in Kagan. He could tell the angles of a spear's flight, he could tell that by running in a straight line from the charging wyvern, allowing it to close the distance, he was shielded from assault from the rest of their line.

Allowing it to close the distance. As though he had a choice at the pace wyvern set. The beast came on so fast Kagan barely had time to put in a few paces before it was upon him, snapping at him with its beak, muscles coiling to leap and rake. Kagan was the one to leap. Ducking in past the snapping jaws and wrapping his arm about the wyvern's neck before it could jerk back, hauling down with all the strength that his body and his dragon had granted him until the whole thing toppled down on top of him.

Wyvern were top heavy without wings or long tail to act as counterbalance. Arazi cavalry defended against this with their spears, but this rider was still reaching for the next from his saddle. Or at least he had been, until Kagan unseated him.



While Kagan was shielded under the mass of the tumbling wyvern's body, the rider was flung free. His training held, he rolled back to his feet, but all of his weapons were back on the mount, and Kagan had at least a few spears left intact. On the other hand, the wyvern had every one of its natural weapons at the ready and was raking at Kagan with its back claws even as it tried to right itself and untangle from his embrace. He hung in close. His grip on the neck lost, but his body slick against the wet underbelly of the beast, tiny scales scraping over his open wounds like emery paper.

Fingers sliding with no traction, he caught hold of one of the stunted wing stumps as it spun back to its feet, letting the momentum of the powerful creature beneath him carry him to where he needed to be. He was flung through the air in an arch to land in the saddle.

The wyvern would not bear a rider other than its bond-mate. No wyvern would. But Kagan did not need its obedience, just its position.

Slaying an aslinda-dragon was the greatest crime any Arazi could commit, but to slay any bonded dragon-kin would be just as grievous in the eyes of those bonded to them. The others could not strike at him without risking the wyvern, so they would not strike. Kagan had no such compunctions.

Reaching to the place by the saddle where a spear was sure to be, muscle memory served Kagan well. He launched once, twice, three times in swift succession. A new spear rolling into place in the saddle each time. He was not aiming for killing blows, but to startle, to disrupt, to break up the flocking pattern of the wyvern so that they had to rely on the judgement of the riders. The riders who were not governed by predatory instinct, but by a tangled mess of emotion that they needed to pick through to make a decision. More time.

The wyvern beneath him had gathered itself enough to turn and snap, earning a spearpoint to the eye for its trouble. Its rider, who'd charged at Kagan the moment he came upright, now fell shrieking to his knees, claspng at his own blinded eye. The bond was their greatest strength, and their greatest weakness.

While he was distracted with the writhing of the wyvern beneath him, one of the riders took a shot at him, but they were so afraid to hit his mount that it soared clear overhead. Eight of them were still mounted and a threat, sixteen enemies all, to the one of him. Yet they were fettered and he was not. He returned a spear to the one who'd risked attacking him and their mount had to fling itself flat on the ground to avoid it, flinging out its vestigial wings as wide as it could but still nearly falling.

The rest were closing on him. It was the only sound tactic when fighting at range risked their own flight. Too much motion was going on around him to track it all, and he had no control over this wyvern to navigate through it either.

But in chaos, instinct reigned.

Injured, and feeling its own pain echoed back from its bond-mate, the wyvern beneath Kagan fled to the familiar for comfort. It ran to its rider.

Kagan leapt from the stirrups to pierce the Arazi through. Weight and momentum carried him down, and it did not stop until the spearhead was buried in the ash below and the haft had snapped. What luck that there was someone waiting right there for him with another fresh spear in hand to offer him.

Rider and wyvern died as he fled, their final anguish and terror washing over the battlefield and buying Kagan another moment. Another few steps.

The ruins of the witch's hut was in reach now. It lacked its roof, but the stone mostly stood. A bottleneck to hold them back, just as he'd planned. Just a step inside showed how little it had been touched beyond the flames. Dried herbs lay crispened on the floor. Her supplies of healing unguents were baked in their pots. Mother Vinegar had died for nothing, for being in the place where people of power needed nobody to be. All that she was, all that she had done, gone, for nothing. There would be no magic to save him, no wave of a wand to take the pain away.

Turning to face the blackened frame of the low lintelled door where he'd banged his head a dozen times through the years, he bled and he ached and he raged for all that had been lost. For his own place in the Arazi. For the old woman who'd died after lifetimes of helping others without thanks. For all of it.

When the first scout burst through the door he hit her straight on. Their spear-hafts crossed, both twisting and pushing, each trying to line up a lethal strike.

She was young and quick, but he had done this so many times it came as easy as breathing, she made her push, spearhead leaping at his face and he leaned in past it, raking his own blade across her chest, making her hurt instead of trying to kill. The tip rattled over her ribs.

Her grip on her own weapon loosened. Kagan roared as he drove his forehead into her face, snapping it back. Blinding her with the moment of darkness. His next thrust pierced her through the same wound in her torso, and he kicked her back out over the threshold to free up his spear once more. Ready for the next of them to come.

They had not been trained for this, cavalry would never find themselves in close confines, they fought in the open, using lancing momentum and wide sweeps to slaughter their enemies when they were close enough. Up close all their grace and speed counted for nothing.

Two of them tried to come on together but the narrowed doorway stopped them in their tracks and one peeled off to find another way in. Kagan could hear claws screeching over stone as the wyverns tried to surmount the wall.

Kagan couldn't take the second one with the same ease as the first. They'd all felt how she'd died, they'd all learned from it. This one didn't rush for a killing blow, or clash with him directly, instead he used the reach of his weapon, thrusting and feinting, trying to lure Kagan forward. Too obvious, too easy to avoid. Kagan slapped aside the thrusts that came close and ignored the rest, all too obvious when emotion flowed through the air, easy to read as words on a page.

When the scout dropped to their knees, Kagan was taken completely by surprise. There was a thrust at his legs that he had to turn aside with a spin of his own spear, but it was all a grander feint than he could have guessed at.

Looking out past the distraction on his knees, he saw what was coming. The spear was already in flight, one of the others had thrown it, it was headed straight for his chest.

There was no time to dodge, no time to even think, only to cross his arms over his chest and bear the brunt as best he could. The tip pierced his wrist, smashed into the haft of his spear and hammered it all into his breastbone. It had been a perfect shot. A killing throw.

The spear's tip broke through scale and skin to touch bone, but it went no further.

Springing up from the ground, the other Arazi leapt to his feet to land the killing blow, giving Kagan no time to think. No time to flinch away from what had to be done.

Blood gushed out as he unpinned his arm. The spear stuck through flesh and wood remained in place, but all of it swung out and away from Kagan. Clattering off the walls, sending agonising jolts through him. He let that pain wash out and batter against the snarling Arazi. Let him flinch in Kagan's place.

Another bought moment. He brought the shattered spear in his hand down on the Arazi, cracking and splintering it apart. Buying another moment. Then another as the wood all fell away and the full blade was left exposed. He slapped his hand down onto the wyvern rider's face. Driving the spear-tip of his kinsman into the soft flesh there. Once, twice, three times before it hooked amidst the tangle of tendon and teeth and the next time Kagan lifted his hand he hauled the whole man aloft.

The next thrown spear took Kagan's living shield through the back. Showering his lower body in gore. It was another perfect shot, angled low so he could not use the same method to block again. It would have gutted him if it had not been for the now dead Arazi stuck to his hand.

Reaching forward, Kagan caught his foe's spear in his off-hand as the spasms of death cost the boy his grip. Shock had washed away, leaving only the pain in its wake, burning and aching all up the length of his arm. It took two kicks to part the dead man from his palm, and each one sent a fresh jolt of agony up him. That spear had to come out. It didn't matter how he'd bleed, if he could not fight he was dead.

The wyvern atop the house had been bonded to the one who now lay dead. It collapsed down into the room in a shower of dust and charcoaled roof-beams. Landing half on the scraps of blackened fur that still marked where the old woman had slept and half on Kagan. The spear haft through his hand snapped under the impact of it, the head ripping the wound in his hand wide enough to see through. Bile burned at the back of his throat, but he had no time.

The other climber came down at him now, while he was still half-pinned under the wyvern corpse. She landed hard on its back, crushing the full weight of both of them down onto Kagan. All air was crushed from his lungs, all strength fled him as the wound in his chest throbbed and bled.

She lifted her spear high overhead in both hands and roared out her vengeance upon him. All he had killed had been her kin. By blood or by bond, they were her people and he had slain them. Just as Mother Vinegar had been his.

To his surprise, the spear was still in his off-hand. Still pointed to his foe and ready. As she brought her strike down with all her might, he used all that he had left to return the blow in kind, thrusting up into her gut even as his fingers went cold from all the blood he was losing.

He could not say why he hit first. If she hesitated too long. If there was less distance for his spear to travel. If he was simply faster. It didn't matter. His spear burrowed up through her guts to wedge under

her ribcage and her brutal strike pounded into his shoulder with a fraction of the power she'd meant to put behind it.

His scales were thickest about his shoulders, almost horny outcroppings compared to the smooth coating on the rest of his skin. They took the brunt of the impact. Not enough to stop the blade from cutting through to wedge in the joint, but enough to keep his arm attached.

Another would be coming for him. Another moment would pass and he'd still be here pinned in the ash waiting for death. He strained and dragged himself out with the one arm that still worked, inch by inch, back towards the open doorway where the next one would come.

Blood trailed behind him like the marking of a snail's passage. Mixing into the soil and ash until there was a black smear all the way to the doorway. He leaned on the frame to get his feet, trusting none of the other walls not to crumble away under his weight and then he looked out.

He expected to see spears already in flight. He expected to be rushed the moment he was in the clear sunlight.

Instead all was still. A wind had whipped up the ash of this place into something like a mist, and if there were wyverns and riders still afoot, Kagan could not see them. He took one staggering step out into the dim and was almost overwhelmed by the chill. It was summer in Espher, it should never have felt so cold. For a moment he wondered if this was just death, a haziness taking his sight and the freezing embrace of death creeping inside him, but when he stumbled back into the house, it faded. The pain came back, but with it a mounting terror.

Was this the work of the thing in the pool? Some primordial monster that he had tempted out to end their lives. It did not feel the same. None of the peace that he'd felt last time was there, dragging him down to death with the dulcet tones of his own voice. Whatever it was, the cavalry who had pursued him were making no sound and closing no distance. He had a few moments of respite.

The moments stretched on and on with silence prevailing. Kagan did not understand what had happened outside, and he dare not go and explore lest the cold already seeping into him from his wounds should start to spread once more. The fog outside still hung thick and viscous, looking less like a fallen cloud and more like the poisonous product of some burning poison. When he reached out through the broken walls of this place, numbness spread along his fingertips.

Just when he thought that he might go mad if he did not hear a sound beyond his own breathing, it came. The steady beat that had been the match to his own heart throughout his entire life. Somewhere up there beyond the cloud, there was a dragon in flight. He could see the shadow of it when it passed between sun and fog. He could feel it tugging at his heart. An aslinda-dragon, not one of these wyvern runts. A true beast of prey. If he was not shaking before, then he would have started now.

He sank back as deep as he could into the ruined house and held his emotions tight against him so they could not find him. Whatever this fog might be, a few beats of a dragon's wings could clear it and leave him entirely exposed. He had to stay still and silent if he meant to survive, even as the pounding of leathery wings made him want to leap and bound about with joy. Slowly the sound passed over him, and he began to breathe again. Then another set of wings came. Then another. His teeth chattered together as he tried and failed to keep still.

Had this been the result of the scout's interference or a planned foray? Had he unleashed the dragon-lords upon Espher with his clumsiness? He could not say, but he could count, three dragons in all headed due south. For the heartlands of the kingdom, and the capitol.

They would have no scouts to warn of the coming beasts, and a dragon in flight would outpace any messenger that the lesser towns could dispatch. There was going to be a massacre.

Finally the last wing beats abated, and Kagan unleashed his senses once more to prove to himself that another was not coming. Beneath a cracked flagstone, he found Mother Vinegar's old cat-gut line that she used to stitch his wounds. Behind a stone in the fireplace, he found the schnapps she'd always claimed not to have, the kind he knew she washed needles off with because of the way they stung and smelled when she tended his wounds. He had never done this for himself before, but he'd seen it done more often than he'd have liked. With his clumsy left hand and the haft of a broken spear between his teeth to hold down the screams, he began to stitch.