

**Walking the Meridian**  
***La Brina, Regola Dei Cerva 111***

For almost a season the girl had lay still. Not sleeping. Not waking. Just still. When Mother Vinegar pressed broth to her lips she would drink it down. When she was hauled about, she would go where she was put. A simple task like splitting wood could be set and she'd move through the motions again and again, but the vital spark that made Orsina herself had been burned away.

Kagan had left to return to his hunting, promising a return by first frost, and Mother Vinegar had not even troubled to look up from her ward to wave him off. He had never seen the old woman so wracked with care for another. It troubled him.

When she came back, it was in pieces. One day her braying laugh in the silence of the clearing. The next a whispered story of the Graverobber, told to herself, curled up by the fire. With the lack of work the muscle she'd been building melted away, and the extra year that had been snatched from her filled in the rest with softness in places where before she'd had none. None would say she was pretty, but with those wide bright eyes starting to focus once more, she could at least be called striking without it being a sly jab.

There was no one moment when Mother Vinegar could say for certain that the tide had turned and Orsina was washed back to the shore, but sure enough, before the first frost crusted the vines outside, she was talking away again as if there was nothing better in all the world than to flap her lips.

Mother Vinegar took it as a sign. They had not spoken of what Orsina did on that fateful day since her recovery began, but now that the time was fast approaching for the girl to head off, she needed to be told she was going, and why.

"Covotana?"

Mother Vinegar didn't look up from the soup pot. "That's right."

Orsina tried again. "The capitol. Covotana?"

"That's the one." The old woman's head bobbed along with the bubbling of the kettle.

Once more with feeling, Orsina said, "You want me to go to..."

"The House of Seven Shadows." Mother Vinegar cut her off. "Best place for you."

Orsina flopped down onto the heaped furs. "But I'm not a... But... what?"

"They've had sense enough to train lowborn like you in the past." Mother Vinegar slopped out their dinner and passed it down. "When they see the depth of your curse they'll do the same again."

There was a frantic edge to her voice when Orsina asked, "Is this because of what happened with the dragon? Because..."

"You'd do best not to mention that to anyone. Plenty folk would call you a liar, and them that believe you will be out to get something for it." Glancing over at the stricken look on the girl's face, Mother

Vinegar did the unthinkable, and tried some kindness. "You're not a bad lass. Terrible apprentice. But not bad in the other parts of you. You'd have done well witching, but this thing of yours, this... hollow that the shades slip into. It needs dealing with."

"I thought that was why you brought me out here? I thought that was why I've been living in the woods since I was barely old enough to think." Soup set aside, Orsina practically crawled to the old woman. "What was the point of all that if we weren't dealing with it?"

"If you'd have kept your head shut you might have waited out your days in peace, but you had to..." Twice in her short life, Orsina was facing exile from all she knew. Once had been enough to break Kagan. Once had been enough to leave Mother Vinegar herself so scarred up on the insides that she'd never let anyone close again. There were tears pricking at the girl's eyes. Even with her bad sight and the dim light of the cooking fire Mother Vinegar could see that another push might have sent the girl tumbling back into the silence and stillness that still haunted the moments she wasn't kept busy. She could see all of that, but she could see the second shadow lingering behind the girl too. The looming darkness of the thing from beneath the pond, always here with her now. Latched into her heart. "I'm not blaming you for fighting with everything you've got. Nobody could blame you. But you've opened a door now that can't be shut. Old Ginny Greenteeth won't be the worst of them to come knocking. There's older and stronger than her out there. Old enough that they don't need inviting. You need to be taught to ride them, not let them ride you."

The tears had pooled in the girl's eyes, but they weren't falling yet. "And what about you?"

It knocked the old woman off track. "Me?"

"Alone out here in the forest with nobody to take care of you..."

The old hag was still cackling two days later when Kagan arrived.

There was little to pack for the girl, she owned nothing and wanted to owe nothing. Apart from some tack that she could justify to herself as the fruit of her own labours, and the clothes on her back which she couldn't leave behind for reasons of dignity, she left her apprenticeship with the witch empty handed. Overly formal, she even gave a curtsy to the hag before they departed into the southern reach. "Thank you for all of your help."

Mother Vinegar flinched. She hadn't been able to help at all, just delay the inevitable. That one had barbs to it, the girl would have made a good witch, right enough.

There was no long road for Orsina to meander along towards the horizon. She rounded a corner out of the dell and she vanished into the trees. Come into Mother Vinegar's life as fast as she departed. The old woman felt her shoulders slump though she told them to stay up. She felt the tangle in her chest like she'd breathed in cobweb. Kagan didn't help at all, laying a heavy hand on her shoulder and rumbling, "Don't you worry, I'll take good care of her."

Mother Vinegar snorted.

"And I'll take good care of myself too."

"Ain't you I'm worried for." Mother Vinegar brushed him off and ducked back inside her overgrown cottage. "It's everybody else."

Kagan let out a sigh to himself. Everyone in this country was so dramatic. He blamed it on all the Opera.

To her credit, Orsina had continued to travel south through the unfamiliar woods. To her detriment, she'd wandered far from the proper path, trailing along a rabbit trail that led to a gully and then a spring. She was almost ready to turn back and look for Kagan when she spotted him out of the corner of her eye. "Damn it Kagan. I'm going to tie a bell around your neck."

"It isn't my fault you move through the undergrowth with all the grace of a wyvern in heat."

She feigned a retch. "Is that a thing?"

"As far as you know."

She threw a stick at him, but it missed by several feet to bounce off a tree. They both smiled, and then just when Orsina was feeling like herself again for the first time, her smile fractured. This was too much. Too soon. Too like the last time. A tremor ran through her, and she could swear that she tasted swamp water on her lips.

Kagan hoisted her off her feet before she knew what was happening. The disorientation of being lifted and spun around over his shoulder combining with the disorientation her own mind was inflicting on her about where and when she was. The forest swirled and she came back to herself. "Hey! I can walk."

He bounced her on his shoulder, but didn't put her down. "I can see that from the way you walked in completely the wrong direction."

She hit him on the back. "Well I've never been this way before."

"Well then perhaps the person who has been this way should lead?"

She tried to mimic the rumble of his voice. "Well then perhaps the person who has should put me down and get on with it."

Kagan let out a long rumbling sigh. "It is going to be a long walk."

"So you're my horse now? You're going to carry me the whole way?"

"No." He dumped her into the bushes. "It is going to be a long walk, listening to you the whole way."

There was no question that the distance was greater than either one of them had travelled in recent years. Almost a match for Kagan's long slow march of misery down over the steppes in the days following his exile. Yet this time he had more company than bitter memories, and complain as he might, he took no small amusement in the antics of the girl.

Over and over again, he caught a wry laugh halfway up his throat and strangled it. So easily he could forget what she had done? So easily he could set aside the sin and love the sinner? There was nothing worse in all the world than a slayer of dragons, yet he found a smile tugging at his lips each time the girl goaded and badgered him.

When they bedded down around the fire at night, Kagan took the first watch and he was left alone with his thoughts. They seemed to grow darker as the fire burned lower.

While the sun was still a faint glow on the horizon he thought of abandoning her. Even if she were not the most grievous of sinners, what was she to him? There was no reason for him to obey the demands of some hag of no consequence, sequestered away in some forest far from anyone that might help him regain his rightful place. The first few miles might have been safe enough, but beyond them came more and more danger. Civilisation reared up ahead of them, more fearsome than the dragon that had once pursued them, and while Kagan was an Arazi warrior with fear of no mere man, a group of peasants could bludgeon any great warrior to death whether he was afraid of them or not. There were other forests where he could hunt. The whole of the steppes lay open to him too. There was no reason that the girl could not simply wake up and find him gone.

When the only light was the flame flickering between them, he thought of smothering her in her sleep. To abandon her would not ensure her death, the only way to make certain that she paid for what she had done was to slay her himself, and though he could not drown her as she had drowned the poor dragon on the hunt, he could choke the life from her. He could close his hands into a fist about her scrawny neck and squeeze and squeeze until all the evil she'd done washed away.

When the fire was down to embers and it was time to rouse Orsina and restock it, he thought of killing himself. He could not kill her. He had all night to do it, his hands quaked with the anticipation of soft flesh between them, yet he could not kill her. He had affection for her, but that had never stopped him killing before when his honour demanded it. That would have been easy for a master of emotions to push aside. It was not the fear of her looking up at him with betrayal in her eyes as he slaughtered her that stayed his hands. It was the fear of her looking up at him with the eyes of some primordial monster that she had given over her flesh to.

Espher had never been to war with his people, and now that he had seen first-hand what even an untrained manipulator of their magics could do, he feared the outcome such a conflict could bring. Were he still mounted on his dragon, armed and armoured – as he was born to be – then he could have stood against this child without doubt as to the outcome, but down here in the dirt alongside her, it became a matter of chance.

She roused at his first touch, as though her long season laying unmoved had given her all the sleep she'd ever need. She fed the fire, settled into his place and smiled down at him as he tried to summon up the courage to do what should be done.

He didn't manage on the first night, or on the second. On the third night they slept huddled together, cowering beneath the lea of a toppled tree's roots as the seasonal rain began to pound and lightning tore great ripples across the sky, cracking "loud as the beating of a dragon's wings." Those whispered words were the first time that she heard Kagan willingly speak of dragons since her return to the waking world, though he flinched and turned his face away from her soon after.

In the dead of the night when the thunder rolled her right out of her sleep, Kagan was still staring up at the sky, waiting to see something behind the curtain of cloud. Solemn face illuminated by the lightning's flare. There was a low rumble in his throat, almost too low for human ears to hear. A song.

Come morning he was even more grumpy than before as they stepped out from under the boughs of the Selvaggia and into open country. The rain did not slow, nor did the chill it had settled into their bones show a hint of moving along once they'd set out. The sun never seemed to fully rise that day,

masked by the rains, and by midday the dark and the damp began to take its toll on the travellers. In the sky above there was no sun, and in Kagan's heart there was dread.

The smart thing to do would be to find a road and find an inn for the night, give the girl some time to recover. All that time off her feet had left her so breathless after a few hours walking that she could barely talk at him incessantly any more. A forced march could kill as surely as dragon fire. He'd seen it. But for every step they strove on closer to her grave they moved a little further from his.

By his reckoning, it was three hundred miles to Covotana. A day's travel for a dragon. Two weeks hard march. She wasn't going to make it. Not like this. If he'd money in his pouch they might have found a caravan heading south and bought their way on. If he'd a brain in his head, he'd turn around and run in the opposite direction.

When they reached a road they followed along it. He didn't run. She didn't slow, though he could see the weight of the miles on her back.

Even exhausted, she wouldn't shut up. "Is this the way to Covotana?"

"It is a way to Covotana."

She rolled her eyes. "But is it in this direction?"

"This road meets other roads which lead there." Kagan picked up his pace a little. If she had enough breath to pester him, she had enough breath to jog.

She caught up to him in a couple of bounding strides, considered jumping up onto his back the way she used to when she was smaller, then thought better of it. "But this is the right way?"

He cast a long glance her way, then sighed out, "This is the way that I am taking us."

"You don't know the way to Covotana." Her brows drew down as she finally voiced the suspicion.

He already had the lie ready on the tip of his tongue. "Everyone knows the way to Covotana. Covotana is south. This road leads west, yet it will meet a road that leads south, so it is the way."

She was scrambling to get far enough ahead of him to get a good look at his face. "Are you sure?"

What was the point in lying to her? It wasn't like she could turn back now. "No."

"You've never been there?" Orsina gaped up at him. As if her more worldly companion had strode the length of the continent before settling on the same overgrown thicket she'd been born to.

"Of course I have not." He scoffed. "I am an exile with no title or allegiance to keep me safe in foreign lands. I'd sooner stick my head in a sack of snakes."

She wrapped her cloaks and shawls around herself a little tighter, not that the drenched cloth was doing much to keep out the cold or the wet. "But you're taking me there?"

"They're your people." He flinched even as he said it. "You'll fit right in."

She gave him a dead eyed stare. "I'll fit in. In the sack of snakes?"

"You already bite anyone who disagrees with you." She couldn't see him grin, but there was a rumble to his voice that had to be a laugh.

"Hey, I grew out of that!" She was giggling despite her indignance.

"Did you? Or did we just stop disagreeing with you while in biting distance?" As if to prove his point, she kicked at his shins and he had to dance out of reach.

"I was a baby!"

"My scars tell a different tale." He thrust out a finger level with her nose. "Witness this! Witness the breadth. Adult teeth!"

She grabbed at his wrist and mimed a chomp. "One time!"

His own laugh turned to a snarl before it reached his lips and he advanced on her. "One time. Once is all it takes to damn you. One mistake. One sin. Then the rest of your days are forfeit, sure as if you'd been the one to die."

"Alright!" Orsina caught hold of his shoulders, a pile of dirt heaping up behind her heels as he kept coming closer. "I get the message! I promise I won't bite you anymore."

If there had been fear in her eyes, he might have been able to do it. He might have been able to absolve his own sin and escaped the doom that awaited him, but even as he loomed over her, a veritable giant in a kingdom of gnats, she was still smiling up at him like he was a friend taking a joke too far. She patted him on the shoulder and his resolve crumbled to dust. "You... you had better not. We are not carrying all this dry meat so you can turn to cannibalism."

"Hey now, that's from Mother Vinegar's private barrel." She turned back to the road with a bounce in her step despite the rain doing its damndest to wash the smile from her face. "You know her... It's probably human meat."

There was a lull as they trudged ever on, with Kagan still so lost in the swirl of his own thoughts that it didn't cross his troubled mind until too late that something was troubling the girl too. He shook some water free from where it had gathered in the scaled ridge along his brow. "She will be fine on her own. You don't need to worry for the hag. When I get back, I will look in on her. As I used to."

The absurdity of it was enough to yank Orsina out of whatever melancholy had taken hold of her. She blurted out, "What?" before degenerating into a fit of laughter so serious they had to stop walking for her to catch her breath afterwards. "Mother Vinegar is going to outlive all of us. Dragon magic or not. If the skies opened and lightning came down, she'd just scowl at it until she went away. The medicines she makes? None of them do anything; plagues just run away because they heard Mother Vinegar is coming."

He didn't smile, but there was a thinning around his scary lips that Orsina had learned meant he was trying not to. It was strange to her, that he'd spend so much of his life trying not to show the joy he was taking in it, but she didn't pry. She didn't even know how to start asking how he'd ended up this way. He grunted, "I take your point. My hope was that you'd take some comfort in knowing that what you'd left behind was still there."

She dithered along the road, still caught up in her own story, still oblivious to the grim mood that seemed to be pouring down on her companion with the rain. "If they burned down the whole Selvaggia, she'd be sitting on top of the heap, bossing around whoever came to sweep out the ashes."

Eventually he could take no more of her glibness. "I know nothing of the place I left behind. I hear no word. I see no sign of my people but the rare beast coming down off the steppes."

Orsina stopped in her tracks. This was the closest they'd come yet to discussing... what had happened before. "Which then tries to murder you."

"Or I hunt in turn..."

She opened her mouth, but he held up a hand to her, his head cocked to the side, listening to something she couldn't hear. "Off the road."

She moved without having to be told twice, but she was still her. She couldn't just go in silence. "What? What's happening?"

He flinched as whatever sense let him do his work overwhelmed his composure. "Horses... Run ragged. Quickly, down off the road."

She was already slipping and sliding down the embankment at the side of the road, struggling for balance when he came skating down past her, hooking an arm around her waist and dragging her down into the filth beside him. Pressing her down, pressing the breath out of her before she could complain.

At first it sounded like thunder rolling overhead, and she strained to look up before Kagan caught hold of her head in one clawed hand and dragged her in closer. Eye to eye with him, she finally fell silent. The thunder was not overhead, it was in the earth. It was rumbling through the ground. Through her. She could feel it in her bones. The hammering of hooves.

She had only seen the horses of a farming village in her time. Big beasts, but dull and hapless. She would not recognise them in the things that streamed along the road, slick with lather and rain.

Kagan would have known them. Even if they weren't burrowing into his head from their proximity. He'd fought warhorses on the steppe. Even though they fared poorly against draconic cavalry, there was an edge to them he'd found all too familiar. Beasts ridden always at the edge of madness.

The thunder faded, Orsina jerked herself free of his grasp and spat a gob of mud at him, gasping all the way.

He was lost in thought as he crawled past her, back towards the road. They were both coated with mud now on every side. Every fold of their clothes weighted with it. He grumbled under his breath. "Cavaliers at full gallop."

She slugged him in the shoulder the moment she had her feet. "What the hell was that about?!"

"You didn't want to be at their mercy," He dismissed her fury with a wave of his hand. "Not out here with nobody around."

She kicked him. "I'm from Espher, you big slab of stupid!" And again. To no noticeable effect. "They're on my side!"

“You’re a peasant girl and they’re men of power. They’re not on your side. You’re their prey.”

He could feel it prickling on the back of his neck. Not the chill of the rain or the wind, but the same cold he’d felt permeating the girl when he’d lifted her broken body from the dragon’s throat. “I’m nobody’s prey, Kagan.”

“They wouldn’t know that. They’d ride you down if they were in a hurry, and do much worse if they had the time to spare.” When she opened her mouth to object he talked right over her. “You might fight them. You might win. But then you’re the mad witch who killed a troop of cavaliers and they send their whole army to put you down.”

Even now he could see her trying to string together an argument, but he closed the distance and wiped the mud back from her face, slicking down her hair and stilling her for a moment. “Who we are, what we can do... those things don’t matter to the ones who sit on thrones. If you aren’t some lord or lady, you aren’t a person. You’re a problem.”

She set her jaw and jerked her head out of his grip. “I don’t believe that.”

“Believe it or not, they’ll kill you all the same.” He sighed. “Straightforward or slow. They always get their way.”