

Together In the Dark
Gemmazione, Regola Dei Cerva 112

Kagan's eyes had been swollen shut for the first week. That had been better.

He could tell himself that the slop he was eating every few days when they pushed it under his door was some sort of soup. That the tickling across his feet was just the straw, not rats. That the smell was just the corner he'd marked to do his business, not the rot of some corpse abandoned in another cell.

Sight made everything worse.

The torches flickered outside the barred window in the cell door, shadowed when a jailor strolled by. He had flinched each time he heard them shuffling by while he was blind, and now with sight, he got to experience that terror through two senses.

The pain of the beating had faded by the time that his eyes opened up. Dragon-bonded Arazi were made of sterner stuff than mere human beings. Pain faded faster than bruises, and both faded in the time it would have taken a man who'd suffered that same beating just to stir from the dark depths of healing sleep.

What hurt him more was the confinement, and the dread. It was said that there was no torture worse to a dragon than to confine it. To block out the sight of the sky it called home and hobble its wings. That much was true, and enough of the dragon had passed to Kagan through their bond that he could feel the weight of the castle up above him. The arched stone, the bricks, the dirt, all of it between him and the clean free air that he longed to breath.

The only escape from this hell had been sleep.

In his dreams, he had always flown. Spread wide his wings and taken flight, knowing that those dreams were not entirely his own, nor entirely his bond-partner's. Even though they had been so far from each other, separated by so much, they had still shared those dreams. Now he did not dream at all. Or if he did, it was of being buried alive, startling him back out of sleep the moment he found he could not draw breath.

In itself, that would have been bad enough, but he found his courage faltering in the face of torture. He had nothing to hide. There was no secret of his people that might be brought to bear against them now in his memory. He had been gone far too long for that. Everything might have been different in the land he once called home, and he would never know it.

If there was nothing that he needed to keep secret, then there would be no need for torture to loosen his tongue, surely. If he told them anything that they asked, there would be no need for... whatever it was that he kept hearing the other prisoners screaming about in the room at the end of the corridor. Whatever they asked, he would answer truly. There was no need for deception. Even if they asked about Orsina and the witch of the woods, he had no reason not to spill all their secrets too. It wasn't as though anything he said down here might touch them, up there.

The only thing that could keep his mouth shut was his pride, and there was scarce pride left in him. What hadn't been stripped from him with his dragon and title had withered in the long years living like a

savage in the woods and died a final death somewhere in the ditches he'd covered in so that little men on their little horses couldn't see him and kill him. Pride was a luxury for the powerful.

Even the strength of his arms and the surety of his aim were not his own. He'd been bonded to his dragon so young that every muscle of his body could have been rightly accounted to its influence rather than his own efforts. Everything that he was came from her, and now she was gone. He was alone in this dark place, without even the memory of wind beneath her wings to lift his heart. It had been too long. It had all been too long ago, and he had lingered on and on, even knowing that it was just making things worse. He should have spit himself on the first spear he'd made after his exile. At least that would have ended their suffering.

Yet when the candlelight flickered beyond the cell's barred window, hope sparked within him all the same. Even knowing he should have died and put an end to the pain long ago, still treacherous instinct made him hunger for life. Even if all that life held was more of this misery. With a grunt of effort he turned his head up to meet his jailor's judging stare. The eyes that peered back were blue as open sky, framed by a spill of red hair, bright as dragon fire. Hope flared again at this omen. This was no guardsman.

The door of his cell was dragged open, haltingly, jamming on the filth and straw stuck beneath it, and blue-eyes came inside. There was no guard at the slim boy's heels. No chains on Kagan's wrists or ankles. He could kill him with a twist of his hands and be past him and free. Were the guards mad? He started to drag himself upright when a gust of wind slammed him back down with enough force to drive the air from his lungs.

"Now that is settled, perhaps we can have a conversation rather than a scuffle? I am Artemio Volpe, a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Etcetera."

Kagan eyed the boy again and saw the shadows dancing behind him; thrown up vast and looming against the walls of the tiny cell by the candle-light. "What do you want, necromancer?"

"Ah good," Artemio glanced around the room for somewhere to sit, then thought better of it. "You understand the situation."

There was still one truth Kagan had clung to through his confinement. "I haven't done anything."

"I have no idea what crime you are accused of, so pleading your case to me is something of a wasted effort." Artemio sighed. "I have other questions for you. Questions that only Arazi can answer."

It hurt to shrug his shoulders as his scales scratched up the stones of the wall behind him, but Kagan did it all the same. "Bad luck for you then. I don't have any Arazi answers. Haven't been home since before you were squirted out."

Artemio looked somewhat disgusted at that description of his birth but he waved the concern away. "The questions are of a more metaphysical nature."

"Do I look like a philosopher?" Kagan snorted.

For a moment, Artemio looked surprised that the brute knew the word philosopher, but then he reassessed. "You look like you could use a friend to could speak in your favour to the courts."

“You’d be that friend, would you?” Kagan’s growling laugh was bitter.

“I’d do what I could for you. I can’t promise much, because I don’t know what you did, but if your information helps me, I’ll ask them for all the clemency that can be offered.”

Some men would have taken that honesty as a blow, but Kagan liked it. It meant that blue eyes could be trusted to tell him the ugly truth, even when it hurt his chances at getting what he wanted. It was more than he’d expect from a noble, let alone one talking to someone so obviously helpless to take vengeance on them if they reneged. Still, he wasn’t going to ignore the obvious gap in the promise. “And if it doesn’t help?”

Artemio sank down to his haunches. The tails of his coat spreading over the filth of the cell floor. “So long as you tell me the truth, I shall do all I can.”

“Alright. I’m not promising I’ll know the answers, but you can ask.”

Artemio recited, word perfect from his own lessons. “Arazi magic is empathetic. You form a bond with your dragons akin to the relationship between the Shadebound and their Impresario.”

He was looking down at Kagan with expectation. Kagan coughed and it tasted rusty. “Was there a question in there?”

“Is that the extent of your magic?”

“No. Before we’re bonded we can feel everything that’s alive, animals, bugs, some folks even swore they heard trees humming. There’s a few folk with the gift who don’t bond. We use them as scouts. All of us hold on to some of that sense, but most of it goes into our bond.”

“So you can sense anything living around you, even now?”

“All the dead rock around us makes it harder, but you, I feel you.” He closed his eyes and let the wave of emotion wash over him. “Fuzzy from the booze. None of the static you get with liars. Confidence masking fear. Like a beast being hunted.”

Artemio’s face had gone pale and still. All expression drained away in an instant. His hand rested upon the hilt of his rapier in silent threat. “I would prefer if you did not do that again.”

Kagan shrugged his shoulders once more. Sparks flying from the wall where his scales scraped. “You asked.”

“What else can you do?” Those blue eyes narrowed down to slits as he grumbled. “Beyond probing at a man’s heart for weakness?”

“You asked what I could do...”

Artemio cut him off with a glare. “And you demonstrated quite adequately. Now tell me what else you can do.”

Kagan sank back as he tried to put it into words. Something so fundamental to his being, to the lives of all his people, that it had never been voiced before. “Our true power is in the bond. The bond is everything for us. We share everything with our dragon. All we feel, our lives, our strength, even our

dreams blend together. We think a thought and do not know from which of us it first came. We move together like one living thing. Not man and beast, but one and the same." Kagan's breath was strained with pain as he spoke of it. Isolation in this cell had been painful, but it was not worse than he was already suffering day after day. He could speak to others, share fragments of what he was through sounds, but he would never be truly known. Not ever again. There was a beauty that he would never witness again. The simplicity of it lost forever. "We become more than human. More than dragon. We become Arazi. The two in one."

Artemio reached out tentatively, almost reverentially, to press a finger to the ridge of scales on Kagan's brow. Brushing over them carefully, marvelling at the way they blended into skin. Kagan shuddered at the ticklish contact and both men drew back abruptly. Artemio cleared his throat and glanced away. "That's where you got the scales."

"Among other things." He flexed his shoulders and through the tattered remains of his hunter's garb, Artemio could see muscles rippling under his off-colour skin. Muscles that he would have sworn were not present in the human body. Kagan's gravelly voice drew him in. "I can feel the wind on my skin and know how the day's flying will be. She'll see a spear in flight and know where it will travel. She could count, understand language, think as well as any man. Better than most. When we were hurt, our wounds would close faster, with another body's strength to draw on. I'll live as long as my dragon does, and her as long as I do."

"I had always assumed that the exchange would be unequal between a man and a dragon. With one having so much more to give. That your relationship to your mount was more akin to that between beast of burden and owner." He paused, realised how deeply offended Kagan looked at the implication that dragons were mere animals, and twisted his words swiftly. "It is clear that the academic writing upon this subject was sorely lacking. Perhaps when all this is said and done, there will be a treatise to be written about Arazi dragon bonds."

"Nothing more to say about it." Kagan rumbled. "When she needs my strength, she can take it. When I need hers, it is there."

"Could you kill with this power?" Artemio shuffled back again, as though he did not trust himself to keep his hands off. "Draw strength until your... partner died?"

"That isn't how it works." Kagan let out a snort at this man's ignorance. "The bond is trust. Perfect trust. You couldn't kill them any more than you could kill yourself when you're bonded."

Artemio leapt on the opening with a sort of grim desperation, as though he knew it were pointless but he had to commit nonetheless. "People kill themselves all the time."

"People aren't Arazi. Even if you hated yourself, you wouldn't hate your bondmate. You couldn't." Kagan's eyes seemed to be on something beyond the dark wall of the cell behind Artemio's back. Something long distant, but still painful enough to drain his voice of its strength and timbre. "Even if they did the worst thing they could to you, even if they ruined your whole life on a whim, you could never hate them enough to wish any harm on them."

Artemio snapped his fingers. "Could you force this bond on someone? Connect people or beasts and then kill one to kill the other from a distance."

Kagan drew himself back to the now. Grim as it was, it was still better than the place where his mind had gone wandering. "The bond comes from within. It isn't something that can be... done. It's something you are. Nobody can force it. There were stories back when I was young, the kind told in whispers, not around campfires. People tricked into making a bond, coerced like an unwilling bride, but they were just stories. I'd never heard of it really being done. Not much point really. Once the bond is made, there's no going back, and it changes the both of you. Like it or not. Aligns you."

"I had hoped that with your... focus upon it, you might have had better control. But it seems that the connection is just as it is between Shadebound and Impresario. A partnership, despite the difference in your choice of partner." Artemio flopped down into the filth again with a sigh and not a care for the mess it made of his fancy clothes. "There goes that theory."

For a long moment, the silence persisted, until Kagan felt he was obliged to break it. "You want to tell me what this is about?"

Those blue eyes snapped back into focus and Artemio smirked as some fresh idea sprang fully formed into his mind. "Dragons. Serpents. The bond can be with any of the dragon-kin, not just the Greater Dragons?"

Kagan nodded. "Right."

"So is there some smaller type that could tear a person apart? A wyvern or winged serpent. Something that could navigate within a building like this?"

He'd hunted most of them through the years since his exile. Those rare ones that still ran free and far enough from home to cross borders. There was a good market for them. Both as pets and parts. "Most of them would rip you up soon as look at you. Harder to think of one that wouldn't."

"And they could be controlled through the bond," Artemio was back up on his knees. Hands clasped together in excitement. "Commanded from a distance to do exactly as you intend."

"No."

Like he had been frozen, Artemio stayed fixed in place. His expression unmoving. "No?"

Kagan let out a rumbling sigh of his own. "The wyvern, flying serpents, cockatrice, they're dumb. More lizard than dragon. Like wild animals if you leave them alone. They're smarter when they're bonded, but not much smarter. Not smart enough to follow instructions better than a dog."

"Another theory gone." Artemio slumped once more. Kagan looked at him properly now. Not just those odd blue eyes.

Kagan tried again, "What is this about?"

"Murders. Locked rooms. Mysterious and messy. I'm tasked with deciphering the perpetrator."

Kagan laughed. Harsh in the quiet of the dungeon. "And what, you thought we flew a dragon in to do it without anyone noticing?"

"I'm eliminating options." Artemio snapped back.

“By the burned,” The chuckling rumbled on despite Kagan’s best efforts to hold it back. His ribs ached with every laugh. “You must have gone through a lot of them before getting to sneaky dragons.”

“Excellent. The captured barbarian spy is mocking me as a fool.” Artemio raised his hands and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. Groaning out. “The perfect end to a perfect day.”

“If my people wanted yours dead, they’d storm your borders and burn your cities down. They wouldn’t smuggle a wyvern in to kill somebody.”

Artemio’s face remained covered as he mumbled. “Noted.”

Kagan shifted slightly, pulling away from the wall. Not even reaching out for Artemio, not yet. He had moved through forests full of crackling leaves without his footsteps making a sound. A simple lean forward in silence was simple, even if his body still screamed at him with every motion.

His knuckles were swollen and bruised from where they’d been trampled or he’d punched armoured men, yet he could spread his clawed fingers easy enough now. Now that freedom was just a simple reach and twist away. This one would snap like a twig, then Kagan would have a sword. He did not know how many guards were between him and the sky, but they would not be enough. Not now.

His hands were an inch from touching Artemio when the burning started. Wisps of smoke rising from the palms of his hands. Pain creeping in a moment later. “I thought that we had an understanding.”

Kagan pressed in closer, flames licking up from his hands now, blooming up between his fingers. His voice was a growl. “You think fire can stop me? My kind are forged in fire.”

Still, he could not come any further. All his vaunted strength was worthless against the invisible force emanating from Artemio. The flames leapt up all around the tiny Espheran. Not red hot, but blue. Hot enough that even Kagan could not bear them. As Artemio tore his hands from his eyes, the fire exploded out in a wave, blasting the reptilian bulk of Kagan back against the wall.

Those eyes of his were blue flames now. He rose, languid and boneless, to stand over the man who would have seen him dead. Kagan was soot blackened, his skin crispened and cracking everywhere it had faced Artemio. It was enough. The lesson was learned.

“I shall speak of the aid you gave me in my quest when you are brought to trial.” The fire in his eyes flickered out. The last light in the room dying with it. The candle by his feet was now no more than a smear of wax across the floor. “My word has worth, at least to me.”

Kagan struggled to part his lips, the burns sought to seal them and it brought fresh, terrible pain when he tore them open to groan. “Thank. You.”

If Artemio heard him, he gave no sign. All that Kagan heard in response was the door slamming shut once more, returning him to solitude and misery.