



SHADOW WALKER

SPIRIT WALKER 2
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Chapter 1

Avannar was under siege, from within.

The entire city knew about the attack at the Loremasters' headquarters by dawn, and by noon, the entire city was locked down. There was no one in the streets but Loreguard patrols, and they were going door to door, searching for the black fox Arcan they knew was responsible for the attack on the building. They were searching every building, hunting for him, and they were giving every citizen in town a picture of him mass produced on sheets of paper by alchemy. There were no words on the sheets because so few could read, but the likeness of the black fox was scattered across Avannar, along with the stern warning that the Arcan was a Shaman, and that no one should try to capture the Arcan, they should immediately warn the Loreguard. The Loreguard were not gentle in their searching for the Shaman. They felt that the Shaman either had help or had used magic to enslave humans in the city to hide himself, and so they treated every family, every room renter, every business, every single person, as hostile. Families were rounded up and questioned with a truth crystal as the Loreguard tore their houses apart, searching for anything out of the ordinary, armed with magic sniffers and room detectors to ferret out secret chambers, hidden alchemical devices, and possibly a Shaman. Arcans within those houses were all but tortured during questioning to see if they were the Shaman in disguise. Any house searched was marked on maps the Loreguard carried, any people searched were given a magical tattoo on the backs of their hands that would fade after two weeks, a tattoo that couldn't be duplicated because it could only be seen by someone looking for it through a specific alchemical device.

All their efforts earned them nothing.

When they approached the shop of Kyven Steelhammer, a crystalcutter in the employ of the Loremasters to cut difficult or valuable crystals, and also the black fox Arcan for which they were searching, they thought to look at their maps, and discovered that the house had already been searched and all those within questioned. Another search detachment also approached the house whose job was to search houses already searched, but when they approached the shop, they felt that searching someone who worked for the Loremasters himself was a ridiculous thing to do, that it wasn't worth searching because they wouldn't find anything, and they turned away without performing their duty. When a roving patrol approached the human Kyven on the street the evening after the attack, who was walking quickly and fearfully back towards his shop carrying a huge box filled with a great deal of food bought at outrageously high prices from a greedy and enterprising greengrocer who was taking advantage of the chaos in Avannar to make some quick chits, they challenged him for breaking curfew. He answered that he was out of food and desperate, had tried to get the attention of a wandering Loreguard patrol to issue him an emergency pass but had had no luck, and had finally had to come out to get something to eat. They accepted his explanation immediately and without question, and they wrote him out an emergency pass so he could return to his shop without being challenged again. The fact that he was carrying enough food in the box that would last five people for a week didn't cross their minds, even though it should have. It was as if what he had in the box...didn't matter. They could see it was food, but the amount of that food seemed irrelevant, insignificant, not even worth pursuing. The fact that they didn't check to see if he had the Loreguard mark on his hand didn't seem to matter to them either. It was as if it was unimportant, wasn't worth checking, for they were sure that it was already there. *Why would it not be?* they asked themselves, shirking duties they were supposed to very strictly enforce, no matter how mundane the situation appeared to be.

Such was the very subtle and effective ways Clover had bargained them protection. The spirit that watched over their shop and them, a wise-looking owl the size of an eagle, was acting in a very subtle manner by removing the *desire* of the Loreguard to inspect the building or the people

who were inside it when the protection was enacted. The Loreguard and Loremasters knew the shop was there, and they would challenge the inhabitants in matters not dealing with hiding the secret of the shop, but the owl's influence caused them to feel that checking the shop or challenging the inhabitants was a waste of time, and thus not worth pursuing. It was an extremely effective tactic, since the fact that the shop *had* been previously searched took away a viable reason to search it, and so long as the owl was there to discourage their enemies from becoming motivated enough to inspect the shop or question those within, they were safe. Even when they did finally search the shop again once they ordered a second complete search of the city, the owl's subtle suggestion to ignore what was there would cause them to do a very poor job, and thus be much easier to fool. They would accept any plausible explanation as the truth, they would give each room just a cursory glance, and so long as there was nothing outrageously out of place or blatantly obvious, the shop would pass the second inspection as easily as it had passed the first.

The young man that entered the shop through the front door certainly wouldn't look out of place on the streets of Avannar. He was an athletic-looking man that was taller than the norm, with coal black hair that was long, very thick, and a little shaggy, and piercing green eyes. He was a ruggedly handsome man, a face and body that sometimes caused a woman's eye to follow him for a moment, maybe even more so because all he was wearing was a short-sleeved brown linen shirt and a pair of denim trousers, and was wearing a pair of scuffed, worn-looking boots, clothes that showed off his athletic form.

Those women would quickly change their favorable impression of him if they knew the truth of him. Though he appeared to be human, he was not...at least he wasn't right at the moment. Kyven Steelhammer was a Shaman, the only known human Shaman alive, but he was human no longer. To both punish him and to teach him the truth of the terrible lives the Arcans suffered while in slavery, Kyven's totem spirit stripped him of his humanity and transformed him into an Arcan, an Arcan based on the species of monster she created, the *shadow fox*. Kyven was the black-furred

fox the Loreguard were desperately trying to find, Kyven was the Shaman that had invaded the headquarters of the Loremasters, ransacked several offices, killed several men, then set fire to the building both to do as much damage as possible and also to facilitate his escape from their island headquarters. It was Kyven they wanted, to find out just how much he'd discovered, and whether or not he had passed along any of that information to someone else.

Would they be angry if they knew the truth. Not only did Kyven found out everything he needed to know while he was there, that the Loremasters were about to break the treaties they drew up and take military control of the Free Territories, but he also found out that they intended to invade the unclaimed territory west of the Smoke Mountains and establish a kingdom ruled by the Loremasters. He also learned that they wanted to find the original machine that created the first Arcans so that they might use it to find some way to control or destroy the present Arcans or use it to create new ones, and he had learned that they wanted to rebuild the machine in some insane idea that it would make new mana crystals, but that machine had caused the Breach and brought about the destruction of the Great Ancient Civilization. It was insanity to want to build another one. He knew everything that they did not want anyone else to know, and what was worse, he had already passed on that information to the Shaman, and tonight he would pass that information on to someone else that they *really* didn't want to know, for he was an agent of Flaur. With that information in his hands, the other human civilizations of Noraam would discover the perfidy of the Loremasters, and would probably damn well do something about it.

He already knew what was going to be done about it. War. The Arcans east of the Smoke Mountains were slaves, property, used and abused by the whim of humanity. On this side of the mountains, Arcans were bought and sold like commodities, kept in pens and cages and wearing alchemical collars that guaranteed their obedience to their owners. They were worked in all forms of manual labor, worked hard, where life for an Arcan was filled with endless backbreaking labor and life was short and brutal. They were made to fight one another for the amusement of men. They were raced

like horses. They were shown off like prize livestock in competitions. And they were slaughtered for their fur and their meat, which was used to feed to other Arcans, and being killed for his fur was a fate that Kyven had just barely managed to avoid after his totem had transformed him into an Arcan. Though most Arcans were as intelligent as men, their hybrid animalistic appearance made humans consider them to be animals, chattel, creatures without souls that existed only to serve men as beasts of burden. In a way, they were. Kyven knew the secret of the origin of the Arcans, and he knew that the Great Ancient Civilization had created them to be soldiers, to fight in the great war that was the catalyst that destroyed their world. In a way, they had been created to serve man by fighting for him, but the truth was that they were created in the worst way. The Great Ancients killed hundreds of thousands, maybe millions, of humans to create the Arcans, and did not tell them that they would die in the process. From what he was told, the Great Ancients used anyone who could not fight and forced them to die to create an Arcan that could. The young, the old, the infirm, the unfit, all were sacrificed to become Arcans, even infants.

And the humans called Arcans *animals*.

But west of the Smoke Mountains, Arcans were free. There was an entire nation of Arcans hidden far to the northwest, on the cold grassy plains north and west of the Inner Sea, the twisted sea of fresh water, where hundreds of thousands of free Arcans lived safely away from the humans that would enslave them, or destroy them had they known the Arcans were there. But the humans would know about them soon, for the Arcans were preparing for war. Under no circumstance, under no condition, could the Arcans allow the Loremasters to succeed in *any* of their plans. They could not allow the Loremasters to establish territory on the fertile plains of the Snake River, far to the south of the secret Arcan nation of Haven. They could not permit the Loremasters from finding the original machine used to create the Arcans over a thousand years ago, for they would either use it to find some way to kill the Arcans living now, studying the process by which they were made to come up with some way to attack them at that level and kill them, nor could they allow them to have it to make new Arcans that

were tractable and obedient. They didn't know that the machine that created the Arcans required a human sacrifice in order to complete the process, putting a human and an animal in it where the human was killed and imparted the *essence* of his humanity upon the animal, transforming it into an Arcan. And they could not, under any circumstance, allow the Loremasters to build a new version of the machine that had caused the Breach and nearly destroyed Noraam a millennium ago. The Arcans were prepared to sacrifice their entire race in order to prevent such a disaster to come to pass, because the Loremasters had absolutely no idea what kind of unbridled destruction that machine could wreak upon the land and on both human and Arcan that inhabited it.

Kyven had been born human, and had apprenticed to the best crystalcutter in Atan, Master Holm, but he'd been an Arcan for nearly a year now. There were only two of his kind in the entire world, two shadow fox Arcans, and the other, Umbra, was pregnant with three babies, three of his children. In that year he had learned from the inside what kind of life there was for an Arcan on the east side of the mountains, and it had so horrified him that his life was now utterly devoted to their salvation. Kyven had joined the Masked, the secret organization of Arcans and humans that worked ceaselessly to free the Arcans from enslavement, and he used both his Shaman magic and his shadow powers granted because of what he was for those ends. Kyven was an Arcan, but he was not an Arcan of an animal, he was an Arcan of a *monster*, a creature transformed by magic to possess certain magical qualities or powers. This distinction gave him the same powers of the shadow foxes, the ability to control, create, manipulate, and interact with shadow. His shadow powers allowed him to blend with the shadows to become literally invisible, and change the shape and size of shadows that already existed. He could pull shadows off the ground or walls and into the air, and the most useful trick he'd learned was creating a cloud of shadow around him that could fill a large room. One of his clever little tricks he'd learned was to create just enough shadow and wrap it around himself, then meld into it, rendering him all but invisible, nothing but a shadow himself, which made him almost impossible to see in darkness or dim light. In brighter light, the shadow he wrapped around himself was

visible and let them see at least the shadow with which he was joined, but in sunlight there was little he could do. When there was that much light, his shadows were melted away quickly by the brilliant light, and it took a lot of effort on his part to counteract it. The only thing that really worked was to create a cloud of shadow around him, anything less than that the sunlight burned away. His powers were based on shadow itself, and in simplest terms, the more light there was, the weaker his powers became. The darker it was, the stronger they became, up until there was no light at all, and then he lost his powers. There could be no shadow without both light and darkness, though his powers were definitely attuned to the darkness of shadow rather than the lightness of shadow. The absence of either rendered him all but powerless, only able to do the most basic things.

It was a good thing he had those powers, for as a Shaman, he was very weak. His human heritage made him much weaker than other Shaman, but his totem had worked around that little problem. For her, he was the perfect Shaman, because for what she wanted him to learn, he didn't need power, he only needed stamina...and stamina he had, he had it in spades. His totem spirit's forte was guile, deception, deceit, and her focus was illusion. And since Kyven was a totem Shaman, bound to a particular spirit and granted boons based on the nature of his spirit, that made his illusions stronger and better than illusions created by Shaman who had no totem. For the shadow fox, to kill was the last resort. For the shadow fox, lies and trickery were proper behavior, guile and deceit were the most desired qualities of a Shaman. The shadow fox tried to deceive him and trick him at every turn, and had used his initial trust of her to gain total power over him, gave her the ability to transform him into an Arcan. Kyven hated the fox, hated her for what she did to him, but he was bound to her, and he was helpless. He was *her* slave now, for she held his humanity in her jaws, and if he ever wanted to be human again, he had to serve her. And in the back of his mind, deep in his heart, a part of him knew that she would *never* let him go. He was her possession, and she did not seem the type to give up her possessions.

But, if serving the shadow fox also helped him free the Arcans and stopped the Loremasters, he could live with it. He had grown...accustomed to being an Arcan over the year. He understood their customs and their society, and he could interact with Arcans on their own level, be accepted by them as one of their own. He'd grown used to the unique physical advantages he had as an Arcan, being much stronger and more agile than a human, and armed with sharp claws and deadly teeth that could, and did, kill a human, though it certainly hadn't been easy when he was first changed, unable to walk on his digitigrade legs which were much different from his human plantigrade legs, unable to talk clearly because of his boxy vulpine muzzle. He had grown fond of raw meat, though he'd started that transition while still human, because he'd needed to eat raw meat to recover from being exhausted from his Shaman training. He'd had to learn how to eat and drink all over again because of the muzzle, but he was used to that now. He was truly a child of both races now, a human who knew Arcan custom, who could be accepted in both worlds...and maybe that was what his totem wanted. An Arcan Shaman hiding behind an illusion of a human wouldn't know the little nuances that would allow them to *pass* as a human, where Kyven could because he was born and raised human. And he had been immersed deeply into Arcan society, literally a trial by fire, transformed into an Arcan and literally thrown into the cage with them, where he learned the mannerisms of the Arcans through personal experience, in a way few humans could ever hope to manage, since Arcans were extremely hesitant and guarded around humans. Arcan society was intricate, and he certainly didn't know as much about being an Arcan as he did about being a human, but Kyven had learned the basics quickly, and that basis had allowed him to understand enough to be accepted into Arcan society. He could move freely through both worlds, passing for either human or Arcan, and that gave him a freedom that few could match.

But this...this almost felt *weird*. He looked down at his human hand, almost mesmerized, as he entered his shop through the customer lobby and put the box of groceries on the counter so he could lift the leaf and get back into the shop. It had been nearly a year since he had a human hand, and to see it again when it wasn't an illusion, to feel the air on his skin instead of

shifting through his fur, to not see his black-topped muzzle with the faint touches of white on each side because of the white ruff that came halfway up his muzzle, surrounding his mouth, dominating the bottom of his vision, it was, was *bizarre*. He looked at himself in the reflection of the glass and was startled to see himself as a human, with pale skin because it had been covered by fur for a year, but the same eyes, the same eyes he had as an Arcan, those same piercing green eyes. To see the skin on his neck, see his human arms, see his normal human legs, to not have a tail, it was an eerie feeling after so long.

Too bad it wasn't real. This human shape came from an alchemical device, and right now, halfway across Noraam, Danna Pannen, his human friend, was now wearing his fur, had a muzzle and a tail and had hybrid legs, she was wearing his outward Arcan appearance and he was wearing her outward human one. Beneath this alteration, however, he was still an Arcan, and Danna was still human. He wondered how she reacted to seeing herself in a mirror, since she wasn't exactly friendly with most Arcans. She considered Arcans to be soulless creatures, animals granted human intelligence through alchemy, and whose place was to serve man by the design of the Father and the Trinity. The medallion he wore that gave him that appearance was around his neck, but instead of it having Danna's human face, it now appeared as a fox head, as it changed to reflect Danna's appearance. However she appeared, the medallion appeared. So, he knew what Danna looked like in the face as an Arcan because of the medallion, but to the passerby, it just looked like Kyven was wearing a smoky gray metal fox head necklace, since Danna kept her hair in a braid and that gave the fox head the appearance that it didn't have hair, since it was tied back and pulled down.

At least the transformation was painless when he enacted it. When he changed, his body took on a feeling of water, a feeling of liquid, and then it *flowed* into the other shape. But only his body changed, not his clothes, so he had to be careful about wearing boots or something that may not accommodate his transformation when it was over. For Kyven, that wasn't that hard, because he was the one that controlled the transformation. He had

the time to remove his boots or any binding clothing that wouldn't like suddenly having a tail trying to push through it. But for Danna, he knew, it wasn't quite that simple. She never knew when he was going to use the medallion, so she couldn't wear her boots, and had to wear a pair of pants with a hole in the back for where the tail would go...which exposed the top of the cleft of her buttocks, since that was where the tail came out of an Arcan, extending out at the top of the base of the buttocks and fully clearing them about a quarter of the way down. Danna's only respite was knowing that when Kyven took the human form using the medallion, for every minute he stayed in human form, the medallion would need an equal minute to recharge after he changed back. So if he transformed for two hours, she knew that he couldn't change again for two hours once he changed back. The medallion could also only maintain him in human form for one full day before it exhausted itself and forced him to change back, where it would need a full day to recharge before being usable again.

Thankfully, the fox was thorough with such things. The medallion carried its own protections, and could not be seen by those who did not know it was there. Clover, Patches and Tweak knew about the medallion because the fox and Kyven had specifically shown it to them, they were there when the fox gave it to him. But no one else could see it, touch it, or otherwise interact with it. To Kyven it was a solid object, but to those to whom Kyven did not specifically show the medallion, it did not exist. It couldn't be detected with magic sniffers, it couldn't be touched, there was quite literally no way it could be taken from him by force. And part of that protection also extended to his transformed state, which was actually necessary given that his body would radiate powerful magic to a magic sniffer while he was transformed. While he was a human, any attempt to detect magic about him would fail, to prevent a magic sniffer from penetrating his disguise. It *only* worked when he was wearing the human shape, but that meant that he had up to a full day of invisibility to magical detection if he needed it.

He stared at himself another moment, then lifted the leaf and went in. As soon as he closed the door to the lobby, he put the box on a nearby table,

sat in a chair he'd put by the door, and bent to take off his boots. Patches, his red panda apprentice, hurried out of the kitchen when he sat down. Patches was a small, slim little thing, with red fur but white and beige patches of fur over her eyes and near her ears, which was how she earned her namesake. Her tail was long and thickly furred, with alternating bands of red and tan fur up to the tip, and she wore nothing but a simple gray canvas smock that hung down to her thighs, her cleaning smock that had two large pockets in the front and was belted at her waist with a frayed piece of rope. Patches was a very timid Arcan, the result of severe abuse when she was a child, abuse by both her owners and her parents, but she could be extremely brave when the situation demanded it. There was a hidden strength in his little apprentice, and he admired her for it. When the fat was in the fire, he knew he could depend on her to do what had to be done, even if it terrified her.

“Kyven!” she said with relief. “Was there any trouble?”

“A brush with a patrol, but Clover’s spirit kept me out of trouble,” Kyven answered as she picked up the box, grunting a bit under the weight. Despite her small size, Patches was an Arcan, and that meant that she was stronger than a human of the same size. But, since she was so small, that meant that she wasn’t quite as strong as most human men...but she came close. Her strength would surprise any man who accosted her. “There’s enough in there for the whole week.”

“There must be, it’s so heavy!” she said as she lugged the box towards the kitchen. “I’ll get it sorted out and stored, Kyven.”

“Has Lightfoot came back yet?” he called.

“Not yet,” Clover answered for Patches as she came down the stairs. Clover was a coyote, sleek and athletic, with a beige stomach, grayish-brown fur on her side and back, but with dark stripes along her flanks, running from just under her armpits to her hips. Her hair was cut very short and was unkempt, and her coyote ears poked out from her hair atop her head. Clover was also a Shaman, a much stronger and better trained

Shaman than him, and it was her bargain with the owl spirit that had put it here, protecting them from the Loremasters. Clover was a very mild, unruffled woman who thought fast, and was exceptionally wise. She was his sister Shaman, his role model for proper Shaman behavior, a woman he admired and respected for her intelligence and ability, and in the custom among Arcans, she was his casual lover. “She should be home soon. I am starting to worry about her. It’s very dangerous out there right now.”

“And it’s only going to get worse,” Kyven grunted as he pulled off one of his boots. “I just hope your owl spirit can protect two of us outside at the same time.”

“Of course he can,” she chuckled as she helped him with the other boot. “How much food did you get?”

“Enough for a week,” he answered. “No meat, though, the butcher wouldn’t let me in.”

She sighed. “A week of vegetables. Not a way a Shaman should eat,” she complained mildly.

“Be glad for those vegetables, the greengrocer charged me ten times their worth,” he growled as he freed himself of the other boot, then stood up and started unbuckling his belt. “I’m going to pay him a little visit tonight and get my money back,” he said darkly as he undid the ties on his breeches, and then pulled them down enough to sit and finish taking them off, leaving him nude from the waist down, but it didn’t bother him at all. One thing he had earned from being an Arcan for a year was a complete indifference to his own nudity. His ability to blend into the shadows didn’t work if he wore clothes, so he had adjusted to being naked all the time... though it often didn’t feel that way because of the fur. His Arcan fur almost felt like clothing to him, and he never really felt self-conscious about exposing himself when he was in his fur.

It took but a moment’s concentration. The foxhead medallion flared with light, and then there was the sense of *fluidity* as his outward appearance changed back to his Arcan self. His feet elongated, widened

through the ball of his foot, transformed into a fox's paw, as his shin shortened to create the proper proportion that would allow him to walk. His fingernails and toenails grew out, thickened, curved, forming the non-retractable hooked claws of his breed. His nose, jaw, and face elongated to form his long boxy muzzle, his ears were absorbed back into his head and new ones sprouted from the top, and the snaky line of a tail appeared just above and between his buttocks. Black and white fur sprouted from all over his changing body and quickly grew out to its full length, with a very thick short, soft base, almost like down, a layer of medium-length fur over it, and a slightly shaggy layer of long hairs over that, forming the fur that everyone told him was the softest fur they'd ever felt.

All that change, and yet his eyes never changed, remaining those piercing green eyes in either of his shapes.

He shook himself as if to shake off water, dropping down onto all fours to do so, getting rid of that creepy feeling of fluidity, like his muscles were made of water. His tail slashed behind him several times, then he stretched like a cat, arching his back sharply, then rose back up onto his feet, his body realigning itself to a vertical base.

"That looks *so* much better," Clover noted, putting a padded hand on his shoulder, feeling his fur.

"You are so biased," he accused, stretching his arms out and yawning widely to shake off the last of that feeling. "Much better," he said. "It makes me feel cold and watery when I do that."

"It looks like it would hurt," Patches told him compassionately.

"Not hurt, but it's a creepy feeling," he told her. "Like your bones and muscles turn to water, and you flow into a different shape. Where is that cat?" he complained. "She should have been back by now."

"She left before the crackdown and got caught there when it happened, Kyven. I'm sure she'll be along soon," Clover assured him.

“You know we’re gonna have to be totally honest with Shario,” Kyven said.

“Yes. He has to know who we are, what we’re doing, and what is coming. And we have to stress the fact that war is coming, my brother, and the Arcans will fight.”

He nodded grimly.

The bell of the outer door rang, which caused Kyven to immediately react. He quickly and effortlessly formed an illusion of his human self, wearing the same clothes he’d worn outside, and beckoned to the fox to grant the power to enact the spell. She responded immediately, and Kyven’s form shimmered, the black fox Arcan replaced by a human one. Illusion was the power of his totem, and since he was a totem Shaman, it gave him a command of illusion that far surpassed Clover and other Shaman. They couldn’t make illusions as large as he could or as detailed as he could, couldn’t make them as *believable* as he could. Kyven could introduce such a level of detail that his illusions took on aspects of actual reality. By instilling the *substance* of an object into an illusion, it took on qualities of the real thing. The substance of stone captured into an illusion made the illusion feel like stone to the mind that accepted what it could see, would cause the mind to touch that which was not there and accept it as reality. Kyven had instilled the *substance* of humanity into his illusion, so much so that anyone who touched his bare arm wouldn’t feel the soft fur that was really there, their mind would force them to believe that they touched a man’s tan skin. That was the power of illusion, and that, Kyven believed, was why his kind of magic was actually the most versatile of them all. He was limited only by his ability to instill substance into his illusion. If he made it believable enough, the victims accepted the illusion as reality. The fox told him that the ultimate expression of illusion was to take an illusory sword and use it to inflict a *real* injury, putting so much substance into the illusion that it actually took on aspects of reality. Kyven was nowhere near that level of mastery, but if he could achieve it, then the floodgates would be open. With that kind of ability, he could all but control reality itself,

because it would be by his will that reality would be perceived by those around him.

The door to the shop opened, and Lightfoot stepped through. Lightfoot was a cat Arcan, small and slender, with curious fur that was a riot of jagged white and black horizontal stripes. It was impossible to tell if Lightfoot was black with white stripes, or black with white stripes. Kyven was of a mind that she was white with black stripes because her hair was bone white. Her vertically slitted pupils were intimidating when she met one's gaze. Lightfoot never wore clothes, wore only a wide leather belt around her waist, which usually dipped down over one hip or the other since it was much wider than her slender waist, displaying her small, powerful little body. Like most female Arcans, Lightfoot's breasts were small, and her hips were slightly narrow, giving her a waifish look. But her small little frame concealed deceptive power, even as her little fingers concealed small yet razor-sharp claws. Lightfoot was a fighter, a fighting Arcan, and she was very good at what she did. But, she was a hard Arcan to know. She was almost militantly silent. She expressed herself in the fewest words possible.

Behind her was the reason she went out, for Shario filed in behind her. Shario was a tall, olive-skinned, handsome man with wavy black hair and a black goatee and thin moustache, dressed in a light waistcoat made for the summer heat, soft cotton trousers, and elegant half-boots, dressed like a proper gentleman and a man of means. And while he truly was a man of means, he attained those means in a manner that was not gentlemanly. Shario was a thief who had built his fortune stealing and doing other dastardly things, and had since branched out into legitimate businesses...but that was all a front. Shario was a Flauren spy, sent by his government to keep an eye on things in Avannar. He used his status as a thief and murderer in the city to keep an eye on everything going on, both officially and behind the scenes, keeping Flaur informed of the activities of the Loremasters... which they very much liked to do. Of the kingdoms of Noraam, Flaur was the most resistant to the Loremasters, the most troublesome for them because they were highly independent. They had their own language where

the only other languages spoken on Noraam, Meinar and Nuvian, were spoken by very small kingdoms by comparison, where Flaur was huge, dominating the entire Flauren Peninsula. They followed a different tradition of religion as well, for though they believed in the Father and the Holy Trinity, they had a much more *orthodox* approach, much more formal, much more organized. Flaur had an organized national church, the only kingdom of Noraam whose churches were so organized, watched over by the High Prelate. Flaur was large, organized, strong, and had an independent streak, and had long been a thorn in the side of the Loremasters.

“Ah, Kyven my friend,” he said, shaking Kyven’s hand and clapping him on the upper arm. “I was expecting this invitation. Really, did you have to set fire to the building?”

Kyven chuckled. “Usually I’d say something clever to distract you from that line of thought, but not today,” Kyven told him seriously. “Yes, setting fire to the building was more or less necessary.”

“So you *are* the black fox they seek!” he said with a laugh. As soon as Lightfoot closed the door to the lobby, Kyven dismissed the illusion, which made Shario gasp and take a step back. “*Mei diau*,” he gasped in Flauren, looking him up and down clinically. “Amazing! How do you accomplish such a disguise? When I shook your hand, I felt your skin, felt the linen of your shirt!”

“Part of why I’m still here, Shario,” Kyven told him. “You said you wanted to see what I *really* look like. Well, here you go.”

He laughed. “Then you must have something monumental to tell me, if you’re willing to reveal this secret, my friend.” He looked down. “You cannot accomplish your disguise without clothes?”

He shook his head. “They get in the way,” he answered honestly. “Come in and sit, Shario, we have a *lot* to talk about.”

They sat near his workbench, in chairs pulled from the other benches and his office, and were joined by Tweak before they began. Tweak was his

other apprentice, a small, thin ferret with ruddy beige fur and a dark stripe down his back, as well as a bandit-like mask of brown fur over his eyes. Tweak was a talkative, energetic young ferret that talked fast, walked fast, did most things fast, but he had steady hands and had once been an alchemist's apprentice back at Haven, and could repair alchemical devices. Patches would be the better crystalcutter because she was *much* better at appraising crystals, but Tweak's cutting skills were acceptable for an apprentice.

Not that it would matter much longer. Kyven was training his apprentices in a doomed craft, for the crystals were running out. The Arcans knew it, the Loremasters knew it. The mines that produced crystals were failing. The crystals were created in the Breach, when the Great Ancients used a device they should have never built that breached into the spirit world. That breach had created the crystals that the modern society was using now to power their alchemical devices, spirit energy ripped out of the spirit world and into the real world, where it formed crystals when exposed to the human reality, and then scattered by the force of the explosion, seeding the Smoke Mountains with the crystal deposits that they now mined. The number of crystals created during that cataclysmic event had been *limited*, and now, after discovering them and learning to use them, mankind had used most of them up. Within five years, the crystals would be so rare that, by most estimation, the nations of Noraam would fight over the crystal-producing Smoke Mountains, try to control what few crystals would remain. War would erupt across Noraam, and the way of life known by all its inhabitants would forever change. For one, it would mean that there wouldn't be enough crystals to power the collars that controlled the Arcans. Humanity would lose its easy control over the Arcans, forced to take different measures like chains or ropes, which weren't nearly as effective given a large male Arcan could break chains, and nearly any Arcan, of any size, could kill a human. They were stronger, faster, and most were armed with deadly teeth or claws. Simple chains could not stop an Arcan from killing a human that got too close, and that made controlling slave Arcans much, much harder.

This was the reason why the Arcans of Haven were about to reveal themselves. When the crystals got so scarce that there weren't enough collars for the Arcans, they feared that the humans would solve the problem with a mass slaughter of Arcan slaves. They wouldn't allow that to happen, but that was in the future; but current events had come about in a way that required that they make dramatic, drastic moves now, not in three years when the crystals started getting harder and harder to find. They were going to reveal to the world that Arcans were *not* stupid animals, that they had their own nation far to the northwest, where the winters were frigid and the game plentiful. The Arcans fully expected there to be a backlash over this, a sudden fear of the Arcan slaves, but they saw no choice in the matter. The Loremasters had made a move that required an immediate response, and they could not hide themselves after they responded.

It was a bad situation for the Arcans no matter which way it went, but brutal pragmatism had to rule here. To save all of Noraam, they had to risk a violent backlash against the Arcans still enslaved in human lands. Stopping the Loremasters far outweighed the Arcans in captivity, for if the Loremasters carried out their mad plan, they would die anyway.

Sometimes there were no happy endings.

Kyven sat on his stool as Patches and Tweak sat on theirs, and Clover sat at a chair turned backwards so she could lean on the backrest and also to give her room for her tail, as the chair back was not split or made to accommodate an Arcan. Lightfoot stood just behind Kyven, a silent protective presence.

"There's much to tell you, Shario, and you may not believe some of it," Kyven told him. "But the most important part doesn't depend on whether you believe it or not."

"I'm listening, my friend."

"Last night, we found out what they're doing," Kyven told him. "Simply put, the Loremasters are preparing to take complete control of Noraam."

It took them nearly an hour to explain everything to him. Shario asked no questions, seeming to save them for after they were done, listening with a quiet, intense expression as Kyven explained their three objectives. When he finished, Kyven looked him squarely in the eyes. “We can’t let that happen, Shario,” he told him. “The Arcans will fight. We can’t let them accomplish any of those objectives, any of the three is a threat to the Arcans, and to all of Noraam. You may not believe me about the Arcan device or the device they intend to build, but the solid fact that they’re preparing to set up their own kingdom in the Snake River valley, and they are going to take over the Free Territories. We can’t allow that.”

“Surely there is some evidence of this activity, something you brought from the headquarters.”

“I can’t carry anything, Shario,” Kyven told him. “If I do, I can’t do what I do that lets me move through their headquarters undetected, for the same reason I can’t wear clothes.”

“Without some kind of evidence, I cannot take what you say at face value. I can only take it under advisement and seek out the truth, to verify your claim.”

“Shario, the Arcans have their own home beyond the Smoke Mountains,” Clover told him. “It is a nation of free Arcans, hidden from Noraam. The invasion of the Loremasters into our territory cannot be permitted. If you understand nothing else of what we have told you, then understand that. When the Loremasters cross the mountains, they will meet us, and we will fight. We cannot allow it. We just cannot. We are going to reveal ourselves to Noraam, Shario, reveal that the *Arcans* have a nation of their own. Think about the implications of that. Understand how seriously we take this information.”

He was quiet a long moment. “Ah yes, the mythical Arcan homeland. We sent loyal Flauren Arcans into the wilderness to find the truth, but no word ever returned from them. We feared them dead.”

“We found them, Shario, and convinced them that the lives of our people depended on secrecy,” Clover answered him immediately. “How would the humans of Noraam react to know that the Arcans had their own nation, that they were enslaving *our* people, and our people are not the dumb animals they believe them to be? We feared that the humans would kill our enslaved people in retaliation. The lives of our people enslaved in Noraam depended on our secrecy, leaving us to try to free them through the efforts of the Shaman and the Masked. But we will risk that now, for the sake of *all* of us depends on stopping the Loremasters. That is how seriously *we* take it, Shario.”

“I...cannot promise anything,” he said. “I can only do my patriotic duty to my homeland and send word of this back to them. How they wish to respond is their decision.”

“That’s fine, Shario, but you had to know,” Kyven told him.

“So, the Shaman and the Masked, they work for this Arcan nation?”

“The Shaman do, but the Masked do not,” Clover told him. “As of right now, you are the only human on this side of the mountains that knows of our nation. The Masked do not know, they only know of the Shaman, and work with us to free the Arcans. The Shaman help them, for it is our duty to help our people, as well as the humans.”

“You will help the humans?”

“Are we not here warning you now?” she asked simply. “The spirits care about *all* of us, Shario, both human and Arcan. Would not that the humans would slaughter us, we would help them. The spirits regret and mourn for what they know is coming, but at this point, it is unavoidable. They have worked long years to prevent humans and Arcans from going to war with each other, but now there is no choice. The spirits have spoken, Shario, and they command us to prevent the Loremasters from carrying out their plans, no matter the cost.”

“Most humans would not believe you don’t wish war on humanity.”

“Unfortunately, the Loremasters have been quite efficient with their propaganda,” Clover said with a small frown. “The role of the Shaman is to serve the spirits, but it is also to serve those who need us,” she told him. “That is because the spirits care about us, be us human or Arcan. We Shaman often help humans, though they usually never see our actions. In this case, however, our aid will be quite obvious.”

“We can fight propaganda with propaganda,” Kyven grunted, scratching the white ruff on the side of his mouth. “That’s one thing we were hoping you could help us with, Shario. If the kingdoms of Noraam know what the Loremasters are doing, they won’t find it quite so easy to just walk into the Free Territories and take them over. Especially not when they find out that the Loremasters are moving to secure the mines and what few crystals there are left in them.”

“But we can’t prove that.”

“We can prove they’re about to undertake a military expedition,” he answered. “You said it yourself, Shario, the Loremasters is arming the Loreguard to the hilt. Why would they do that unless they expect some kind of major action? They’re even importing firearms from Eusica. I told you why they were doing it, remember? Well, now we know what they intend to do about it. Just go to Riyan or Stinger Bay, Shario, and see the troops that are flooding into the Free Territories for yourself. The reports I read said that they’re there. Why are they there? What reason would there be for them? The Free Territories don’t have armies outside of little village militias and the Riyan Regulars. The Loremasters don’t need to mass an army unless they have a reason to use it. And they do. They want to take over the mining villages to the west, and they also want to take over Deep River and march into the frontier so they can dig in before winter. To do that, they need troops, they need supplies, and they need labor, and they can’t find any Arcans to use as that labor, so they’re hiring any able-bodied man that’ll take the job, and those men have to be talking about that job. Trace the supplies and the labor, Shario, and you’ll see our information is good.”

Shario was quiet a long moment, then he looked to Patches. “So are you a part of the information network, my little chef?” he asked lightly.

“No, Shario, I just cook and clean,” she answered shyly. “They need me to take care of them while they do the dangerous stuff.”

“We’d be lost without her,” Clover smiled at her.

“I will look into these things, my friends, and see how much corroborates your tale. I will also send word of everything back home, whether I believe it or not, because you want us to know. And I must say, Kyven, that you are already quite famous. The Loremasters have seen you, and if you don’t recall, the mysterious black fox Arcan was the only Arcan ever to escape from the Blue Ring of Alamar, which immediately ran for Atan, which was your home. And now, that selfsame black fox Arcan shows up in Avannar. They might trace the black fox to you.”

Clover looked to Kyven, who sighed. “Well, if Toby didn’t do his job covering up my tracks in Alamar and they connect the black fox that escaped from Alamar to me, they’re gonna figure it out,” he reasoned. “After all, I *did* use my real name. I don’t think the Loremasters are quite so dumb as to miss that connection. But, I also have a pretty powerful defense in that *I am human*. I don’t *have* to lie when they ask me that question under a truth crystal. I have an established history, and the fact that I’m here now, cutting crystals that *only* Kyven Steelhammer could possibly cut, gives me protection. My defense, if it comes to it, will be that this black fox Shaman must have met me while I was prospecting using some kind of disguise, found out who I was, and used my name to pass himself off as me while I was out having my fun before settling down to be a shop master.”

“Yes, that would work, at its face,” he said. “But if they inspect you, they’ll find the truth of you. No disguise I can imagine would allow you to evade a magic sniffer.”

“They’ll never find me, Shario, trust me,” Kyven smiled. “All we want you to do is warn your government, so *someone* beyond us knows what’s going on in human lands. The Arcans have already been warned, and

they're starting to prepare to meet the Loremasters when they march out of the east and into our territory."

"No requests for help?" he asked with a slight smile.

"If you want to help, you can help on *this* side of the mountains," Clover told him. "We do not need even more human armies marching into our territory. That might be seen as a hostile act by our people," she warned.

"I will be sure to stress that," Shario smiled. "But I do need to take you to task for causing me so much trouble, my friends," he told them. "I've already had two of my brothels raided, and I've had to send my Arcans underground for fear of losing them to avenging Loreguard."

"We would have warned you if I'd have expected to make so much noise, so for that much I'm sorry," Kyven told him. "But I'd keep them under wraps if I were you, because I'm not going to let them settle down."

"Eh?"

"I'm going out again, before sunset," he told him. "With the Loreguard turning the city upside down and shaking it to see if I fall out, this is the *perfect* opportunity to poke through their building a little more, because they won't be expecting me to be that brazen. There's something in there I need to know, and I didn't get the chance last night to find that answer. I got a little sidetracked," he chuckled.

"I am against that idea, my brother," Clover told him seriously. "They may be looking for you out here, but they will be on a razor's edge inside."

"Yes, but right now there are a bunch of workers inside cleaning up the mess I made," he said. "With all that confusion, this is the perfect chance to get in and snoop. I already know how I'm going to get in, I just have to wait for his shift to start," he said with a toothy smile. "I'll find out what the Loremasters know about what we're doing with the Arcans, and I'll cause a little more chaos tonight."

"How do you mean, friend Kyven?" Shario asked.

“Well, I don’t know how the Councillors are going to feel if one of their own gets murdered,” he said with an ominous smile. “He was supposed to die last night, but he wasn’t home. Well, as soon as he shows up at home, he’s going to die.”

“You intend to assassinate a Councillor in his own house?” Shario asked with surprise. “I would never dare allow one of my assassins attempt such a dangerous thing!”

“I have advantages they don’t, Shario,” he answered simply. “Most humans have no idea what a Shaman can *really* do, because we’ve never done anything like this before.”

“Truly,” Clover agreed. “We have always strove to preserve life whenever possible, and have never resorted to such tactics because we have always labored to effect change peacefully. But this is war now, Shario. The Shaman will fight, and we can fight in ways the Loremasters are not prepared to counter.”

“Does that give you an idea of what’s coming?” Kyven asked. “The Shaman and the Arcans are now at war with the Loremasters, Shario, and war has no rules. My job here is to disrupt them as much as possible, even as I keep an eye on everything they do. From this day forward, no Councillor or high-ranking Loreguard officer who sets foot off that island is safe. If I know they’re in the city, I’ll try to kill them. If I can kill off their leaders, those below will be in disarray, and it’ll cause problems in their chain of command.”

Shario was quiet a long moment, then he laughed ruefully. “Why do I get the feeling that the Loremasters are in for a very bad month?” he asked with a bright smile at Kyven.

“That’s something I think both of us can hope for, Shario,” Kyven told him. “One thing you can do for me is warn me if you know a high-ranking target leaves the island. Get word to me quickly so I can go out and kill them.”

“I believe that I can fit see to arrange that,” he nodded. “The Loremasters have never been the allies of Flaur. They forced the treaties upon us with threats of instigating war between us and the entirety of Noraam. We have ever felt the occupied nation since we were forced to sign into the agreement. If you wish to depopulate the gilded chairs in the Loremaster headquarters, I will send you off with a cheer and a smile.”

“Oh, and I want one more thing from you, Shario.”

“What is that?”

“I want you to get me a Briton rifle,” he said. “I’ll pay you what it costs you to get it.”

“Why do you want one?”

“Because they don’t take magic to use,” he answered simply. “And I could use that. More to the point, I need the most accurate rifle you can find, Shario. Something I can use to hit a target from three hundred paces with one try.”

“Ah, you want a sniper’s rifle,” Shario said with a knowing smile. “I can get you one, friend Kyven, but they are not cheap. It will cost you nearly two thousand chits.”

“Done. Tweak, can you go get the money please?”

“Surely, Kyven. Be right back,” he said, jumping up and hurrying towards the stairs to the basement.

“I would suggest you ensure that rifle cannot be traced back to you, Shario,” Clover warned. “I believe you have an understanding of why Kyven wants it.”

“Yes, yes, of course, they’ll never know it came from me,” he said with a nod.

Tweak returned quickly carrying a small leather pouch. “Two thousand chits,” he said, offering it to Shario.

“Thank you, my boy,” Shario smiled, tucking the pouch into his waistcoat. “I’ll have the rifle for you by sunset, Kyven.”

“Just bring it to the shop, someone will be here to get it,” he nodded.

“Very well, very well, I’ll take my leave now to pass along this information. When I get word of what will be done about it, I’ll be sure to let you know.”

“We’ll be here,” Kyven said. “Do you want help getting home?”

“Help?” he laughed lightly. “No, I’ll be fine. As you know, my whorehouse is just two doors down, and I can get home from there with no trouble. I should visit to ensure my girls are well, anyway. No doubt they are worried and upset with the curfew and the lack of customers. I also need to ensure they have enough food to get through curfew.”

“Lightfoot, go to the roof and make sure there’s no Loreguard that can see Shario get home,” Clover ordered. The small cat nodded once, then turned and bounded up the stairs on all fours.

Kyven again shrouded himself in his human illusion, then escorted Shario to the door. He opened it and looked both ways, making sure the street was empty, and Lightfoot’s call from above sounded an all clear. “Good luck, my friend,” Kyven told him.

“I think you are the one that needs luck, my friend, so I will pray that good fortune finds you today,” he answered, clapping Kyven on the shoulder, then intentionally feeling around. “I felt cloth at first, but now I feel what is there,” he whispered.

“I’ll explain how it works someday,” he whispered back. “Now go before a patrol comes up Sun Street.”

Kyven watched Shario hurry down the street, going past the chandler’s shop and rushing up the steps of his brothel. He knocked just once and was immediately allowed in, so Kyven shut his door and barred it, then went

back into the shop. Inside, Clover, Patches, and Tweak were giving him serious looks. “What?”

he asked.

“My brother, going back out today is insane,” Clover said adamantly. “They are too upset and too wary right now. They will be suspicious, and they will catch you.”

“I need to, Clover,” he said simply as he locked the door to the lobby, and Lightfoot came back down. “I’m positive I can get in and move around without attracting any attention, because only my face is going to be an illusion.”

“How do you mean?”

“I’ve seen you alter clothes using magic, Clover. I’m going to need a common Loreguard soldier’s uniform, can you make it and have it pass a close inspection?”

She opened her maw, and then laughed and nodded. “Easily. What rank do you need to be?”

“A Lieutenant,” he answered. “Lightfoot, I’ll need a pistol and a shockrod for the disguise. Do we have them in the armory?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll need the entire uniform, Clover. Boots, the belt they wear over it, the surcoat, helmet, chain jack, everything. And it does need to fit me.”

“I can make them easily, my brother,” she assured him. “When do you need it?”

“By four bells,” he answered. “The Lieutenant starts his shift at six bells, so I have to be in position to intercept him before he makes it to work.”

“Which is it?”

“Lieutenant Ezram Thatcher,” Kyven answered. “He’s a fellow who secretly frequents certain pubs and tea shops that cater to men who prefer men, but this one’s claim to fame is that he likes to rape his partner. I’m sure the city will be a cleaner place when I kill him and take his place, and he’s so disliked as a moral reprobate that I won’t be overly bothered when I get into the building. The only reason he’s an officer in the Loreguard is because his father is a Colonel. Since he’s an arrogant ass and his father is a high-ranking Loreguard, I can move around with little challenge.”

“Clever,” she nodded.

“Thank Danna, not me, she’s the one that told me about him, and it just took about a day to learn all those unpleasant things about him. Once I’m inside, I’ll pull rank to get around and penetrate the Department of Arcan Affairs to find out what they know. I’ll do that the easy way, I’ll just kill the entire room and take everything that looks promising, then just walk out with it. We *have* to know what they know about what we’re doing, and it’ll get more important when they try to take Deep River.”

“They’ll probably find their first shock when they try to cross the river,” Clover mused. “A single Shaman could pin them on the east bank of the river for *weeks*, preventing them from crossing. All it would take would be the cooperation of a water spirit who would make the river uncrossable.”

“I’m sure they’ll see to it,” Kyven told her.

“We are the only Shaman away from Haven right now, my brother. All the others are there, preparing.”

“Well, they might send you to go do it,” he noted. “It’s a five day trip for you, where it’d be almost a month for someone else.”

“I am needed here.”

“You’re needed where you’ll do the most good. And if you can stop the Loremasters from crossing the river all by yourself, you’ll be doing a hell of a lot more good there than here. I promise you, sister, I can make without you for a while. I’ll be very lonely, but I’ll survive.”

“Flatterer,” she teased, leaning in and licking him on the muzzle fondly.

“Truth isn’t flattery,” he replied, licking her on the cheek in reply. “Now go make that uniform while I go read up on my notes about Ezram Thatcher. Hop, you,” he said lightly, swatting her on her backside.

“You are saving up for a reckoning, my brother,” she winked at him.

“I’ll enjoy that reckoning when we have time to get to it,” he told her as he dropped down on all fours and padded towards the cellar.

The cellar looked like any other cellar, a place where things were stored, but it held a secret. Hidden behind a shelf, a large room hid the heart of their little operation. It was a room holding a desk, a table, several cabinets, a shelf behind the desk holding three alchemical communication machines that kept them in contact with the Masked in Avannar, and also with Virren and Timble in Atan, and on one wall there were pinned hundreds of pieces of paper that held the entirety of the Loremaster operation, each piece of paper holding a name and a rank, some of them with a location under them. Kyven had painstakingly built that wall over weeks, learning every name worth knowing, and working hard to find out just where those men and women had their offices within their headquarters. Most of them only had a name and a rank, very few had an office, but it would both fill out and change over time, as he assassinated Loremasters and they were replaced. But those weren’t the only notes he had. His cabinets had files in them, files of promising targets for exactly what he was going to do, targets he would kill and replace to gain access to the building. Because he might be challenged wearing another man’s face, Kyven made it a point to find out everything about his potential target he might need to know. Names of family members. Friends. Hobbies. Favorite places to go. Ezram Thatcher was a very promising target because he was an officer and he was also hated, with a reputation for being a pervert and an unmitigated ass. That was a golden combination for Kyven, because it made the man very unpopular and less likely to be bothered for idle conversation, and also gave him access and the ability to move about

unchallenged due to his rank. Nobody would want to talk to Thatcher except maybe his father, but Kyven could avoid Colonel Jed Thatcher...or, if the opportunity presented itself, kill him too. The loss of a Colonel in the Loreguard would cause problems for them, and the more trouble Kyven could heap on them, the better.

Today's excursion would serve two purposes. First, he would gain entry to the Department of Arcan Affairs and get the information he meant to get last night. Second, if he had any moment of opportunity to cause damage or kill someone important, he would take it. Kyven could kill silently and without attracting attention, both with and without magic. Since Kyven would be wearing the human shape in the building, it would prevent him from using his claws and teeth, but the human Kyven had a different bite when it came to killing silently, his daggers. Kyven could pin a fly to the wall with a throwing dagger from across the room, and the wound made by a throwing dagger was all but indistinguishable from the wound from a regular dagger. Kyven could plant a dagger in the back of a target of opportunity's neck, which was a silent kill, or if he was in a position to use Shaman magic, there were several ways he could go about killing his target. Either way, the target would be dead, and that would remove someone that might cause the Arcans or Haven any problems later down the road.

The Loreguard would fight their war with soldiers, muskets, and alchemy. Here, the war would be fought with guile, deception, and an assassin's dagger flashing in the night.

Kyven studied his notes about Ezram Thatcher for a couple of hours, until Clover came down with the uniform. "Alright, my brother, let's size it," she said. "Put yourself in that ugly shape."

"Hey, that's the real me," Kyven protested as he stood up and willed the change. Again, his body became water, and it flowed from the shape of an Arcan into the shape of a human. The now naked Kyven stepped out from around the desk and held the coat up to his shoulders, checking the size. "Looks close."

“It will be perfect,” she scoffed. “Patches! Kyven will need underclothes please!” she shouted.

“I’ll bring some down!” she called in reply.

“So ugly,” Clover chuckled, looking at him. “You are a *very* handsome Arcan, my brother. That coloration of yours suits you so well.”

“You are *unbelievably* biased,” he accused.

“Of course I am. I’m an Arcan,” she smiled at him, looking down. “I’m glad to see that some parts of you are just as...impressive, regardless of which shape you wear.”

“Stop, you’ll make me blush,” he said in a bland voice, which made her laugh lightly.

Once Patches delivered the undergarments, Kyven dressed in the uniform with everyone down in his office, to make sure he looked right. Clover was right in that it fit him perfectly, and he cut a rather dashing figure in it, with its blue coat with white epaulets and the single star and stripe on the outside edge that marked him as a Lieutenant. His boots were highly polished and nearly reached his knees, and his weapon belt was notched to accept a pistol holster, sword, and shockrod holster, and he attached the pistol and shockrod to it and checked himself in a full length mirror he kept in the office to practice his illusions. “I’m going to take the sword from Thatcher,” he said. “I’m going to take his shockrod and pistol too, but I wanted ones from the armory to make sure it looked right. And it does. Well done, my sister.”

“Thank you, my brother,” she said with a nod. “I told you, that’s a simple affair.”

“How are you going to replace him, Kyven?” Tweak asked.

“I’m going to ambush him at his house, just before he leaves,” he answered. “The little ass lives by himself about fifteen blocks from here, near the Blue Moon tea shop, his favorite place to try to pick up men to

rape. Lightfoot, I think you should go pick the house over tonight after dark. There might be something useful in there, especially his uniforms. At the very least, we can clean him out of anything valuable.”

Lightfoot nodded silently.

“I’ll disable any alchemical defenses he might have before I leave, so you just have to get past the lock.”

“Easy,” she said simply. Lightfoot was never one to use two words when only one would do.

“Alright then, I think we’re set.”

“I do not like this, my brother.”

“I’ll be fine, because it’s the last thing they’ll expect. The last time I did this, I buried myself somewhere in the city after they found out and didn’t resurface until last night. Odds are, they’ll expect me to do it again, because it’s crazy to try to go back in there immediately afterward...and that’s exactly why it’ll work. Because it *is* crazy, and in this instance, crazy works. If I were me, I’d stay far away from them, so they won’t be expecting me, even though they’re putting up new defenses against me. So, I’ll just sneak in while they’re not looking for me but looking for me, because it’s a crazy thing to do.”

Patches giggled, and Tweak gave him a strange look.

“He’s analyzing what he thinks they think he will do, Tweak,” Clover told him. “And making a very foolish decision based on his assumption of what they think he will do.”

“We’ll find out in about an hour,” he said simply, turning and looking at his back, his head over his shoulder. “Father, that looks weird.”

“No tail,” Clover chuckled.

“It’s the one part of me as an Arcan I never see, why is it so strange that that’s the one part of me I think is the strangest not to see?” he

complained. “I should think it’s strange not to have my muzzle under my eyes, not miss the tail I almost never see.”

“I can’t deal with your male logic right now, my brother,” she smiled at him.

“It’s a good thing you used *male* there, Clover. If you tried to use *female*, I’d have to accuse of you of speaking in impossibilities.”

“Someone doesn’t want dinner before he leaves,” Patches giggled.

“You wouldn’t send me out there without my supper, you fraud. Why, I’d be sneaking up on someone, and my growling stomach would give me away,” he challenged, which made her laugh. “Seriously, though, can you make me something, little one?” he asked.

“I can make you a sandwich of cheese and leftover beef from last night, but there’s not much else unless you want raw vegetables.”

“A sandwich sounds fine, thank you,” he nodded to her.

He knew that he’d be unchallenged on the streets of Avannar dressed as a Loreguard officer, and he found just that. The streets were empty of everything but Loreguard patrols, and they didn’t challenge a Loreguard officer on a horse, moving as if he had a purpose, his horse galloping towards some certain destination.

In reality, the officer and the horse were an illusion. Kyven, in his Arcan form and with his uniform in a pack on his back, ran on all fours beneath the illusion, running as fast as the illusory horse. There was a certain strange joy and freedom that came with being able to run so fast, the ability to outrun any human, to chase down a horse or a deer. That was a very liberating feeling, like he could race the wind, and it made him feel safe in knowing that no man on foot could ever catch him. Out here, on open ground, he was a free man. His muscles moved with a symphony of harmony that propelled him forward with grace and power, his hands and

feet barely touched the cobblestone streets of Avannar, and in a strange way, it almost felt like he was flying.

It seemed that almost before he knew it, he was there. The illusory horse slowed to a stop before a small row house on Coin Way, then, when the officer seemed to nod that he was at the right place, he turned and went around the corner, and then down an alley behind the row of small townhouses. Behind the houses along the alley were a series of gates leading into gardens, and the horse and officer opened a specific gate and trotted into a weedy, unkempt garden. The officer atop the horse dismounted and tied the horse to a fencepost nearby. Kyven had to separate his illusions then, as he moved away from the illusory horse, having to split them into two separate spells to maintain the horse as he moved to the back door of the house. His eyes were open to the spirits, and he saw no alchemical devices on the door to serve as an alarm or deterrent, which would make it easy for Lightfoot when she came later tonight. He put three small scratches on the door from his claws, a mark telling her where to enter, and then he banged loudly on the door.

Moments later, just before he was going to knock again, the door was yanked open, and an effete-looking man with blond hair was in the doorway. He had his uniform pants on and his white undershirt for the coat. “What?” he demanded hotly, looking insulted.

“New orders from headquarters, sir,” Kyven told him, sizing him up. This Ezram Thatcher was about a finger shorter than Kyven in his human form, so that wasn’t going to be a problem. Nobody would notice such a small difference in heights. “You need to pack your field gear, sir, you’ll be leading a search party checking the horse ranches and outlying farms.”

“What? I’m being sent out?” he demanded harshly. “I’m an aide to Colonel Jed Thatcher, I don’t *do* field work!” he said scathingly.

“You can take that up with command, sir. I just do what I’m told, and I was told to deliver these orders and warn you to pack your field gear.”

“We’ll just see about that!” he snapped. “I’m not being sent out like common rabble! My father will see to that!” he declared, storming back into the house...and leaving the door open. Kyven simply stepped inside and closed the door, inwardly smiling. He was almost making this too easy. But when he realized that Ezram was going to use an alchemical talker to contact his father, for he had it in his hands and was turning it on, Kyven had to act. He called forth a zone of silence and dropped it on Ezram Thatcher before he could do anything, which made him freeze in surprise when all sound around him suddenly stopped. He turned to look at Kyven, realization dawning on him that he had to be under attack, and he snatched up the weapon belt on the table to draw his pistol.

He never made it.

The room exploded into darkness as Kyven enacted his shadow powers to fill the room with a cloud of shadow, then he dropped down onto all fours and surged forward, able to see his victim as he seemed to start in surprise, then tore his pistol free of its holster and pointed it wildly, randomly through the room, unable to see, unable to hear, and having no idea where his attacker was. Kyven slithered by him, rose up on his legs behind him, then reached out and touched him with almost surprising gentleness, a single finger on the back of his head. With that touch, Kyven imagined lightning lancing from his finger and into the man’s body, and then beckoned to the fox to grant him the power to cast the spell. Ezram Thatcher’s body suddenly locked up and shuddered horribly as he was electrocuted by Kyven’s spell, and then fell to the floor with eerie silence.

Ezram Thatcher was dead, killed by Shaman magic. And that was why Kyven was so effective as an assassin. His illusions let him get close, his ability to silence and blind his opponents with magic and his shadow powers kept a wary target from stopping him, which would let him get close enough to kill silently with either magic or his natural weaponry.

Of course, now the other part of it came into play, getting rid of the body. Kyven quickly stripped the body, and then took it upstairs and put it in the bed to make it look like he died of natural causes. Were he any other

Shaman, he would have had any number of ways to dispose of the corpse, but Kyven didn't have the kind of power needed to shape stone like Clover to cover it over, or decay the body into dust, or change it. All he could really do was burn it, bury it, go throw it in the river, leave it for Lightfoot to get rid of it, or conceal how the man died and make it appear it was something else that killed him.

Once Ezram Thatcher was removed, Kyven moved quickly. He first took on the human shape using his medallion, then he dressed himself in the uniform that Clover had made for him. He then took all the pins, rank, and decorations off Thatcher's uniform and placed them on his own, then took his sword, pistol, shockrod, and a useful little trinket, the communicator that Thatcher was about to use. Kyven had had one once, when he killed the Loreguard on his first trip here, but he'd given it to Coldfoot and they had it in Haven by now, most likely. The one Coldfoot had would let them listen in on announcements to all roving Loreguard patrols in Avannar, but this one, it was an alchemical communication device that probably only worked between father and son. He finished dressing and then checked himself in the mirror in Ezram's bedroom, and found that he would pass inspection.

Kyven attached the sword to his belt, then prepared himself for the second part of the public show. He put on an illusion of Ezram's face, created an illusory duplicate of himself as he went out the back door, then gave a cold look to the illusion of him that filed past him, silently got on the horse, then trotted off. The strain of maintaining three illusions at once, then two illusions with one of them getting further and further away, made his knees a little weak as the illusory horse and rider turned a corner, the *clop clop* of hooves fading into the distance. He dismissed the illusion of horse and rider and felt much of the strain lift from him, then closed the door and got to work.

First, he had to make sure the house would be safe for Lightfoot. He searched the house first by surveying it with spirit sight, marking the location of every alchemical device in the house, but also seeing that there were two Arcans in the basement, and from the positions they were in, they were being held in tiny cages. He left them where they were for the

moment, for clearing the house for Lightfoot was more important than running down there and getting sidetracked. They could wait a few more minutes. They looked healthy, one of them was asleep, and the other was laying in his tiny cage that Kyven couldn't see in a fetal position, his eyes open and a nervous look on his face. Kyven returned to his mission and inspected every alchemical device in the house, making sure that none of them were dangerous. He did have to disable one device in the bedroom that looked to protect a secret door, and when he got it open, he'd rather have not. It was a room that smelled faintly of waste, of stale urine and feces, and there were whips and lashes and rods hanging on the walls. There was a wooden bed in the center of the bare floor, with leather manacles at the four corners, that told him that the man brought victims into this room to torture them.

Not men. Arcans. The bed's upper board showed deep furrows that could only have been made by a canine or feline Arcan's claws, and there were an array of muzzles on the far wall, for every type of snout that Arcans had, be it short mouse snouts or long canine muzzles. The man liked to rape his lovers, but it seemed his other hobby was torturing Arcans. And no doubt, the two Arcans in the basement had been destined for this room.

Once he got that done, he descended into the basement. It was a dark, dank place filled with small cages stacked on top of each other along the wall, stacked three high and fifteen in total, and two of those cells were occupied by Arcans. One was an adolescent male cat Arcan, a calico with a riot of conflicting colors of fur randomly arrayed across his body. The other was a young male raccoon Arcan, and that was the one that was awake. Kyven then did something he'd never done before, he took on the illusion of himself in his Arcan form, and he was sure to allow them to see that his eyes were glowing with green radiance. That was the mark of a Shaman, eyes lit from within with magical light, for that was how their eyes appeared when their eyes were open to the spirits. "Wake up," Kyven called from the stairs.

Both of the young males looked in his direction. The raccoon gasped and shrank back in his tiny cage, but the cat gave him a startled look and

grabbed the bars of his cage. Kyven noticed that one of his hands was covered with white fur, the other covered with red fur. "Shaman!" he said with a gasp. "Oh, Shaman! Let us out!"

"I will, but it's important that you remain calm and quiet," Kyven told them as he came down into the basement. "Can you do that for me, young ones?"

The raccoon gaped at him, but the cat was reaching out to him with his red paw. Kyven came up to the raccoon, but the young male just cowered deep in his cage, his eyes fearful. "Calmly, little one," Kyven said in a soothing voice. "I am here to help you." He glanced to the cat. "Is he wild?"

"I don't think so," the cat answered. "I've heard him muttering."

"I'm going to let you out, young one, but it's very, very important that you remain quiet and calm. Can you do that?"

The raccoon gazed at him fearfully, then blinked and nodded.

"Good," Kyven said, unlocking the cage and opening the door. "Let me help you out," he offered, reaching a hand in a little for him. The raccoon took his hand, and Kyven gently pulled the young male out of the cage, holding him under his arms as he put him on the floor. The male was almost starved to death, nothing but fur and bones, and his legs trembled to hold up his weight. "Shh, I'll get you something to eat in just a moment. Then you can sit and rest for a while, alright?"

The raccoon nodded, but he held onto Kyven, clinging to him, as he opened the lower cage and helped the calico crawl out. The calico looked in much better shape, and as soon as he was out, he took Kyven's hands and looked up at him adoringly. "Will you bless me, Shaman?" he asked.

"I'm going to do more than that," Kyven chuckled, pulling the cat close to him and embracing both of them, holding them close. Poor boys, how terrifying it had to have been! But it was the lot of the Arcans. Fate rolled the dice when they stood on the auction block, and these two poor boys had rolled hag's eyes. "My name is Kyven, young ones, and I am a

Shaman. I came here to kill your master, but the spirits have also led me to you.”

“He’s dead?” the raccoon asked timidly.

“He’s laying dead up in his room,” Kyven answered immediately. “You can go up and see him for yourself, but for now, come upstairs, come up and eat. His food is now your food.”

“Are you going to rescue us?”

“That wasn’t the original plan, but yes, I’m going to save you,” he said as he led them towards the stairs, the cat following behind him as he carried the raccoon in gentle arms. “I came to kill your master so I can take his place and invade the Loremaster headquarters. I can just take you back to my home on the way there and drop you off. How long have you been here?”

“Just a few days,” the cat answered.

“I don’t know, a long time,” the raccoon answered woodenly. “I was next,” he whispered. “Next to be taken out and disappear. I don’t know where the others went. We didn’t know if it was good or bad to be taken, because it’s always so quiet here...so quiet.”

“It’s over now, little one, shh,” he said gently as they came up into the kitchen. “Find food for both of you while I go finish what I was doing,” he ordered of the cat. “Help our brother, he’s weak.”

“I will, Shaman,” he said with adoring eyes as Kyven set the raccoon down in a chair by the small table.

Kyven left them in the kitchen to finish his sweep of the house, and he found nothing else that required his attention. He did go up and close the secret door in case the raccoon came up here, so as not to upset him with what might have happened to him. From what Kyven could deduce, the man starved the Arcans to weaken them, then dragged them up into his torture room and tormented them until they died. Then he’d just sell off the

body to a butcher and bring up another one when the mood to be cruel hit him.

Kyven knew what it felt like to be starved, and he shuddered at the memory of it. His compassion for the raccoon was quite deep. That had been him, once. Starved nearly to death, and for nothing but the twisted amusement of a sadistic monster. But he'd killed his tormentor, killed Arthur Ledwell to save his wife from his murderous rage, and then that bitch paid him back by trying to sell him in the Blue Ring of Alamar. He guessed he got his revenge on the bitch too, since he'd escaped.

He returned to the kitchen to find the cat literally feeding the raccoon by hand, feeding him slices of bread cut from a dark loaf sitting on the table, which the raccoon ate slowly. Kyven nodded when he saw them and went over to the back door and made sure it was locked, then came up to them. "I'm going to use magic to take on the appearance of Thatcher, the man who bought you," he warned the young males. "So don't be afraid. It's not him, it's me in disguise. Understand?" he asked. When the two of the nodded, he dismissed his illusion of himself and again took on the illusory face of Ezram Thatcher. The raccoon seemed to stare at him in fear for a moment, which Kyven felt needed to be addressed, or the poor boy would never feel peace. "Come with me, young one. Let me show you your former owner's corpse, so you can *know* that he'll never hurt you again."

The raccoon allowed Kyven to pick him up, and Kyven carried him upstairs as he cradled a piece of bread and gnawed on it weakly. He brought him to the door and slipped in, and turned so the raccoon could see the naked corpse splayed out on the bed. "There he is, young one. Dead. He'll never hurt you again."

It didn't surprise him too much when the young raccoon began to cry. Kyven cuddled him and held him close, tucking his head under his chin and comforting him as he cried out his relief, rocking him gently back and forth as he held the weakened young male. "Shh, it's alright, my young one. You're safe now. I'm going to make sure that you'll be cared for. Do you have a name?"

He sniffled. “My mother used to call me Smoke, because of the color of my fur.”

“It’s good to meet you, Smoke. Do you want to go back to the kitchen now?”

“May I?”

“Of course,” he said in a gentle voice, and he carried the young male back down the stairs.

Kyven let the two boys eat for about ten minutes, as he rifled through the first floor, then he went back up and grabbed some of the clothes from the dead man’s room and a blanket. After the two had finished the bread and had some water, he handed a pair of breeches and a belt to the cat. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“I’ve never really had one, Shaman,” he answered. “My last owners just called me cat.”

“Well, you’ll have to think of one,” Kyven told him as he put the blanket around the shoulders of the raccoon. “Fur like that would beg for me to call you Patches, but then *my* Patches wouldn’t appreciate that,” he chuckled. “So don’t name yourself that.”

“Well, I think the spirits have smiled on me to send you to save me, so I think that makes me very lucky. So that’s my name. Lucky.”

“Lucky it is,” Kyven nodded as he finished settling the blanket over the raccoon. “Let me explain how we’re getting out of here,” he began as Lucky tore a hole in the back of the pants with his claw, then pulled them on, having to belt them in place because he was thinner than Thatcher. He knelt down and started rolling the cuffs of the pants so they didn’t drag the ground. “I’m going to take you back to my house, and to do that, I have to use magic that hides us from the Loreguard. While we’re walking, it’s absolutely imperative that you remain absolutely silent and never let go of me, Lucky. Do you understand? You have to grab hold of me and not let go, no matter what.”

“I can just hold your tail.”

“Actually, you can’t, part of *this* magic makes my tail impossible to touch,” he said, motioning at himself. “I’m going to be carrying Smoke, so you need to grab hold of me somewhere and not let go.”

“Okay.”

“Alright then, are you ready to go?” he asked, and both of them nodded. He picked up Smoke and settled him into his arms, then Lucky grabbed hold of his belt.

“Is this good?” he asked.

“That’s fine. Just don’t let go, no matter what happens.”

“I won’t.”

“Alright, from here out, both of you must be very quiet,” he instructed. “And no matter what happens, make no sound and don’t let go of me, even if we’re stopped by the Loreguard. Let me handle it. Do you understand?”

Both of them nodded silently.

“Alright then, let’s go,” he said calmly.

It was very easy. Kyven covered all three of them with a single illusion of Ezram Thatcher walking along the streets, swaggering on his way confidently, as if he owned the whole city. Lucky kept a death-grip on the back of his belt, and Smoke stayed huddled in the blanket Kyven had put around him, allowing Kyven to carry him. Kyven moved straight towards his house, and thankfully, they encountered no patrols of Loreguard on the empty streets, which let him bring the two young males, both of them probably around three or four, just barely past puberty, all the way back to his shop. He took them around to the alley and padded up to the alley door, then knocked on it in a specific pattern that those within would identify. Tweak opened the door for him, and gaped a moment at him before looking at him curiously.

“Move, Tweak,” Kyven ordered in his own voice.

The ferret laughed lightly and backed up, then let him in. As soon as the ferret closed the door, he dismissed the illusion, which revealed his two companions. “Woah!” Tweak exclaimed. “Who are they, Kyven?”

“The Loreguard owned them,” he answered, bringing them into the shop. “Clover! Patches! Lightfoot!” he barked, carrying Smoke into the main shop. The three females hurried to the main shop room at his call, and they all looked curiously at him as he set Smoke down in a chair. “This is Smoke, and that’s Lucky,” Kyven introduced. “The Thatcher boy had them locked in cages in his basement, and I couldn’t leave them. Clover, Smoke has been starved,” he said simply.

“I’ll take care of it, my brother,” she said with a nod, coming up and putting her hand on Smoke’s shoulder. “I am Clover, my young one. I am a Shaman, and I will take care of you.”

“Another Shaman!” Lucky gasped, rushing up and taking hold of her forearm. “Will you bless me, Shaman?”

“Of course I will,” she smiled, putting her hand on his shoulder and giving him the ritual blessing of the Shaman, which made him quiver in delight. “Patches, our young friend here needs food. Whatever meat we have left.”

“We have a little, but not much. I’ll get it,” she nodded, and hurried to the kitchen.

“I cleared his house of any nasty surprises, Lightfoot, you can get in through the back door,” he told the cat. “It has nothing but a lock.”

She nodded silently.

“Are you a Shaman too?” Lucky asked Lightfoot enthusiastically, which she answered with a shake of her head.

“No, Lucky, she is my thief,” Kyven said, giving her a smile. “Nothing is safe from her.”

“Especially you,” she answered, which made him chuckle.

“Patches and Tweak work here in the house, helping us stay hidden,” he added. “Together, we do our work.”

“You will stay with us for a little while to recover from your ordeal, and when you are recovered, we will send you on to a place where there are no humans,” Clover told them with a gentle smile.

“There is no such place,” Smoke said in a voice that was barely more than a whisper.

“Yes there is, young one, far from here,” Kyven told him. “But I’ll let Clover explain it to you while she gets you more to eat. I’ll be back sometime after dark, Clover.”

“I wish you would not do this, my brother. It is too dangerous,” she objected.

“I’ll be fine, I promise,” he told her, leaning in and kissing her on the nose. “Be careful out there, Lightfoot.”

She nodded calmly to him.

Kyven’s bold plan to just march up to the guards at the bridge and bluff his way past actually *worked*.

There were fifteen guards there, and when Kyven approached and railed at them in Ezram Thatcher’s voice, being as annoying and insufferable as possible, he clearly must have convinced them that he was the real deal, for they allowed him to pass after inspecting him with a magic sniffer. The sniffer found no magic about him, which was a gift from the medallion, for it hid both its own magic and the magic of his illusion, making him appear to be completely normal. After that, he waltzed over the bridge and into a very busy grounds, where guards, Loremasters, and workers were milling around all over the place. Kyven marched down the gravel path and towards the building, passing Loremasters in deep

discussion, Loreguard supervising workers who were cleaning up, and men and women carrying beams, boards, rugs, and panes of glass. They must have cleaned up most of the fire damage on the sixth floor, and were now rebuilding. Kyven simply attached himself to one of those gangs of workers and walked right in with them, acting like he was supervising them. The guards at the front doors looked a little surprised to see him herding a group of workers, but they did not challenge him, letting him in without comment.

It worked.

Kyven continued to play the deception as the workers filed up the nearest set of stairs, moving just close enough to seem that he was with them but not so close that they took notice. When they went past the third floor, however, Kyven slowed down and let them get a lead on him, and he approached the guards on the fourth floor. He gave them both a challenging stair as he squared off, clearly intending to move onto their floor, and his eyes arrogantly *dared* them to say a word. They saluted him sharply, and he came up to them. “Anything unusual?” he demanded.

“No sir!” one of them answered.

“Good. Carry on,” he said, stalking past them and turning right, as if going to the right side stairs to check in with the guards at that station. He passed by the right stair guards without a word, just returning their salute, then came to the far side and did the same with the far side stair guards. He came back down the center hallway, going towards the door he knew, the Department of Arcan Control. He reached it and opened the door, and again found himself in the large cluttered office he had visited some days ago, on his very first visit to the headquarters. There were only two people in the office, sitting at desks on the far side, quills scratching as they wrote reports. “You there,” Kyven said as he closed the door, looking at the two tired-looking men. “Where is the rest of your department? Surely you two aren’t the only ones on duty!”

“They pulled my workers to supervise the construction efforts on the sixth floor,” the balding middle-aged man said with a sour grunt. “What did

you need, Lieutenant?”

“You just gave me what I need,” Kyven answered, and without another word, he struck. He raised a hand and pictured in his mind the withering blast of cold striking at an angle that would kill both men but not hit their desks, hitting them only from the neck up. He beckoned to the fox for the power to grant the spell, and she responded. A pale blue beam of light erupted from his hand, and it struck the two men and the wall behind them. Their heads became rimed in frost, as did the wall, killing them instantly. They slumped to their desks, the balding man’s head cracking in two like a piece of glass, showing the frozen interior of his head.

He moved fast. He grabbed a satchel from the floor beside the desk of the balding man, then started quickly grabbing up reports. He cleared out the balding man’s desk, then the other man’s desk, then he ran over to a cabinet and quickly searched it. He found where they were filing their reports, and he gathered up the most recent and worked his way backwards and stuffed them into the satchel, stuffing it almost to overflowing. He realized that he needed more storage space, so he ransacked the office for something he could use, and came up with a small bag that looked to be used for carrying a lunch, then piled even more papers into it. He filled that too, and decided that he both had enough and also was out of time. Both sets of guards had seen him come into the office, so *someone* had to leave the office, and very soon. Kyven kept the balding man’s face firmly in mind and ready to take an illusion of him at any time, then hid the satchel and the small lunch bag by shouldering the satchel and tying the bag to it, then covering them over with an illusion that they weren’t there, like he was leaving the office exactly as he appeared when he entered it.

He stepped out of the office and marched immediately towards the far stair guards, and they saluted him when he reached them. “Anything unusual?” he asked.

“Nothing, sir,” one of them answered.

“Very good. Carry on,” he said imperiously, then walked past them and down the stairs. He returned to the ground floor, and instead of heading towards the door leading to the front, he instead left through the back door, which brought him out behind the building and near the Loreguard barracks. He knew that right now, getting out was imperative, for the faster he did this, the less chance he had of being discovered. However, the tricky part now was getting out, which would require a little help. He couldn’t just walk out the way he’d come in else he’d be challenged, and no amount of bluster would get him past those guards without them finding out why someone who’d just come on duty was leaving after little more than an hour. To get out, he needed to attach himself to a Loreguard patrol that was leaving the island. That, or he waited for about half an hour, for the sun was already very low on the western horizon, and soon it would be dark enough for him to attempt to slip past.

As a wagon ambled away, he realized that *that* was his way out. That wagon was heading towards the bridge, and was clearly going out to pick up more supplies to rebuild the sixth floor. He glanced around to make sure nobody was really paying much attention, then he hurried over to it. He stopped the wagon with a sharp call, putting an annoyed look on the driver and his assistant, two rough-looking men, the driver tall and wide and with a bristling black beard, and the assistant tall and lanky and with a trimmed blond beard. “I will inspect your wagon before you leave, to make sure no contraband is leaving!” Kyven announced arrogantly.

“Contraband? The wagon’s empty, you jackass!” the black-bearded man declared with a hot look.

“Then this will take but a moment, won’t it?” Kyven retorted. “Just hold until I’m done!”

Kyven carefully put a foot onto the wagon and pulled himself up, but doing so with a very light and gentle manner that put his weight onto the wagon very gently and prevented it from rocking or dipping, which would have warned the two men, who were pointedly not looking at him, that he was on the wagon. He stepped over the back gate and knelt down, then,

after looking around quickly to make sure nobody was paying attention to them, he knelt down as if to look at something, then created a new illusion of himself that leaned back up. That illusion then split from him as he summoned forth a shadow, spread it through the existing shadow and also around himself, and then melded to it, creating a slightly darker shadow than what would be normal on the shadowed side of the wagon, something that wouldn't be obviously noticeable. Kyven hunkered down as his illusion of himself got down and moved over to the assistant's side of the wagon, and waved them on. "Be about your business," the illusion called as if disappointed.

"Oh, we will, you jackass," the driver growled. "And this'll be the last job I take for the Loremasters. It's always more trouble than it's worth coming here!" The driver snapped the reins, and his two horses started out, leaving the illusion behind. Kyven glanced up and saw where the illusion was, then literally laid down in the wagon, against the side, staying in the shadow cast by the wagon's side as he had his illusion start walking towards the shore. He kept just his eyes over the top of the wagon, watching his illusion as the wagon left it, and he had it walk towards the wagon so as not to let it get too far away from him too quickly and thus make it much harder to maintain. The illusion did get further away as the wagon pulled away from it, making Kyven strain to hold it and keep himself hidden in shadow at the same time. He looked around as his breath threatened to start coming quickly, seeing if anyone seemed to be looking at the illusion, and when it seemed to him that nobody was, he released it and let it waver and vanish. He tensed, waiting for a shout of alarm, but none came. Nobody had been paying attention to the illusion, and thus nobody seemed to immediately notice that it vanished.

The wagon was stopped on the bridge, as he knew it would be, and he saw two guards look into the back to make sure it was empty. Both of them looked right at him, but saw only shadow, and their eyes did not pick up that the shadow was perhaps a little deeper than it should have been, maybe just the tiniest bit darker. They looked out as the driver complained about being stopped, which made the Loreguard officer on the bridge chuckle.

“Sometimes Lieutenants get a little too full of themselves,” he said. “I should know, I’m a Lieutenant as well.”

The driver laughed with him. “Well, you ain’t no ass like that other one,” he said. “Fuckin’ little jackass. I’d love to meet him out on the streets some dark night.”

“What did he look like?”

“Snotty bastard with blond hair and a look like he owns the island,” the driver answered.

“Straight nose? Brown eyes? A little mole over his left eye?” the officer asked, and when the rider nodded, he chuckled. “That’s Thatcher. Jackass describes him fairly well.”

“Well, you guys should beat the shit out of him,” the driver grated.

“Some of us would love to do just that,” the officer laughed. “About when do you think you’ll be back?”

“Won’t be gone long,” he promised. “The lumber’s all stacked and waiting to be picked up.”

The wagon started up again, and unwittingly carried Kyven out of danger.

He rode with it for about a block, then very carefully and very gently rose up, still shrouded in shadow and melded into it, then silently crept to the back of the wagon, stepped over the gate, and then stepped off of it. The wagon rocked slightly with the loss of his weight, but neither the driver or the passenger seemed to notice, probably attributing the rocking to the cobblestones. Kyven moved to the side, stepped into an alley, and after using spirit sight to ensure that no one was lurking near and able to see him, he took on the illusion of a large boarhound. A common dog was something that the roving patrols of Loreguard would not challenge without good reason, because it’s just a *dog*. He unshrouded himself from his shadow and

walked down the alley to the other side, then stepped out onto Hammer Street, just as alarms rang on the island.

They had discovered his handiwork.

Now it was important to get home. Keeping his eyes open to the spirits so he could see through buildings, he ran at a fairly fast clip, yet feeling very slow since he was in his human form, as the dog illusion that hid him trotted along at a fair speed. Kyven saw a roving patrol around a corner, about to come onto his street, so he angled quickly into a shop doorway and had his illusion lay down, looking for all the world like a dog waiting to get back inside. The roving patrol stopped in the intersection as the Sergeant in command of the four men listened to his communicator, then he barked a command to his men and the four of them ran towards the Loremaster headquarters, running right past him without giving him a single glance. He had his illusion stand up, and then it padded out of the doorway as Kyven trotted to the intersection, turned the way they'd come, and broke out into a ground-eating run that the illusion took at an easy lope. He dodged another patrol by ducking into an alley and dismissing it as he melded to the deepening shadows of the alley, vanishing from sight completely, but the patrol wasn't really looking for him. They too were moving at a trotting run towards the Loremaster headquarters, and Kyven realized they were taking up positions to stop someone from leaving the island, occupying critical streets and intersections.

His choice of a dog rather than a Loreguard or Loremaster had been a wise choice, he realized. They would have challenged any human they saw, but they wouldn't care about a dog.

He slipped out of the alley after restoring his canine illusion and loped down Sun Street, and then turned a corner, went one block, and slipped into the alley behind his shop. He vanished into shadow once more and dismissed his illusion when he scanned the buildings around to ensure nobody was looking into the alley, then rapped in that specific sequence on the back door of the shop to tell them to let him in. Clover was the one to come to the door, looking through it with spirit sight, and when she saw

nothing on the other side, she opened it. Not even spirit sight could penetrate his cloak of shadows. Kyven slipped in around her, and when he patted her on the side, she closed the door and barred it.

“I’m home,” he said, returning to visibility. “That was quick and easy.”

“So it worked?”

“Well enough,” he answered, handing her the satchel and bag. “I cleaned out the Department of Arcan Control,” he winked. “I took everything I could carry.”

“Was there any trouble?”

He shook his head as they went back into the main shop. “I think your owl spirit was watching over me, though I never saw it. Nobody challenged me. They all took my lies for the truth without question.”

“No, the owl would not protect you on their island,” she said. “You were just that convincing. But I still say that was too dangerous, my brother.”

“I knew it would be, Clover, but it was worth the risk,” he said, looking around. “Where are the boys?”

“Upstairs resting,” she answered. “Patches and Tweak are keeping them company. Lightfoot is in the kitchen.”

“Good,” he said, sitting down and leaning over to take off his boot. “Your uniform was perfect, my sister,” he complemented her. “After I took Thatcher’s jacket decorations and weapon belt, you couldn’t tell your uniform from a real one.”

“I told you it would work,” she told him. “But that does not change the fact that you should not have done that!”

“I can’t do my job without taking risks, Clover,” he said mildly as he took off the other boot. “I knew the security on the island itself would be weak because of all the confusion with them rebuilding after the fire, and I

was right. I was able to walk around without attracting any attention, and they'd stripped the clerks out of the department to work on the sixth floor, leaving only two functionaries in the office, so they were easy to kill without making a sound. But I know I won't be able to do it again. They already know I was there, I heard the alarms when I was well off the island. They never expected me to be crazy enough to come back the very next day, and they paid for it. But I know that they'll tighten security severely now, maybe even put magic sniffers everywhere to try to catch me using Shaman magic, since I used magic to kill the two clerks in the office. They're not stupid, and I know they're not. I exploited an assumption this time, and they won't make that assumption again. The next time I go, no matter when that is or what I did beforehand, they'll be waiting for me." He stood and took off the jacket, handing it to Clover, then the shirt, then he pushed off the trousers, leaving him in nothing but braes. He pushed those down and off as well, then enacted the power of his medallion. He again felt his body become cold and liquid, and it flowed back into his Arcan shape. He dropped to all fours and shook himself vigorously to get rid of that feeling, sneezed, then rose back up onto his feet. "I hate that feeling," he said, flexing his fingers to work out the last of that cold, watery feeling.

"Much better," Clover said, looking at him with open admiration.

"Down, girl, we have work to do," he chided with a toothy grin. "Let me go up and visit the two boys, then we'll skulk off to our underground lair and go through these papers and find out exactly what the Loremasters know about what we're doing."

The calico brightened when Kyven came into the room that the Arcans shared upstairs. Lucky was sitting by the bed where Tweak slept most often, sitting with Smoke, who was resting with the covers pulled up and around him. The raccoon was sleeping peacefully, and Patches was putting clean sheets down on one of the other beds. Tweak was helping her, and a look up showed him that Lightfoot was in the attic, waiting for it to get dark enough to go out. Kyven had no worries at all about letting Lightfoot go out with all the soldiers on the streets. They'd never see her. "Did you have a good

meal, Lucky?” he asked, letting the young cat give him a hug, patting him on the back.

“Yes, I’m full!” he said happily. “Will you bless me, Shaman?”

Kyven smiled and gave him the ritual blessing, which made him smile beatifically. “How is Smoke?”

“Sleeping after eating all he wanted,” Lucky answered.

“How is he, sister?” he asked Clover, who came in behind him.

“He will need several days to recover, but he will recover,” she answered.

“That’s good,” Kyven sighed in relief, patting Lucky’s shoulder. “It looks like you’ll be stuck with us for a little while, young one,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No!” he said happily. “My mother used to tell me about the Shaman, but I never thought I’d meet one! What kind of Arcan are you, Shaman?”

Kyven chuckled. “One of only two, young one,” he answered. “My breed is the rarest of them all.” He leaned over Smoke and saw that the gray raccoon was breathing steadily, his thin, emaciated face peaceful. Kyven didn’t wake him, was just content that he looked better, not as afraid. “Now I have work to do, young one, I just wanted to make sure you’re alright.”

“I’m fine,” he said with a nod.

Kyven patted him on the shoulder. “Alright then, get some rest, and obey the others. There are things about this house that can be dangerous, so listen to them. They know.”

“I will,” he promised.

Kyven and Clover left the two boys with Patches and Tweak, padding downstairs. “Young, aren’t they?”

“About three, both of them,” Clover answered. “In their first stage of

maturity. What you would call a teenager,” she told him as they went through the main shop and to the stairs leading to the cellar.

“I can’t imagine growing that fast,” Kyven grunted. “It must be painful.”

“Not at all,” she answered as they both opened their eyes to the spirits as they came down into the dark cellar. “I grew from the size of a human toddler to the size of a human teen in about two years,” she told him. “I was very clumsy during that time because I was constantly growing, as are we all, but there’s little pain.”

“You must have eaten like crazy.”

“A child eats about the same as an adult. In that respect, it’s easy to portion meals for us,” she chuckled. They entered the office, and he saw that she’d already placed the satchel and bag on the desk. She shut the door and padded up to the desk, and as Kyven leaned down to start taking out the papers, he yelped when Clover smacked him on the backside, under his upraised tail, and she was not gentle.

“Ow! What the hell was that for?” he demanded, whirling to face her.

“For being foolish with your life,” she answered in a serious voice. “This was a dangerous thing to do!” she accused, pointing at the papers. “They are alert and wary, my brother! It was just blind luck that you got away with it this time!”

“I know, that’s why I won’t do it again, because the opportunity is gone,” he said mildly. “I told you, Clover, the circumstances were uniquely favorable for another invasion. But now that they saw me slip through in their moment of confusion, they won’t give me another chance. I took a risk because I saw it as a worthwhile risk. The fact that I was proven right doesn’t lower the risk that I took, and I know it. I’m sorry if I frightened you, my sister, but I felt it had to be done. But for what it’s worth, thank you for trusting me enough to let me do it.”

She looked up at him, then wordlessly embraced him. “I trust you to keep yourself alive, even if you are the one that placed yourself in danger to begin with.”

“Always have to get in the last word,” he chuckled, patting her on the back.

“You are my brother Shaman, but you are also one of my best friends, Kyven. I would hate to lose you to your own overconfidence.”

“Ah, but I was following the path of wisdom, my sister,” he told her lightly. “It told me that I had an opportunity that I couldn’t pass up.”

“I’m starting to forgive you. You are backsliding,” she said, swatting him lightly on his rump.

“Always,” he chuckled. “Now let’s see what the Loremasters know, and hope that I killed the only man who knows what’s on these papers.”

“They will know we think they are close,” she said.

“Yes, but without solid information, they won’t know what or why,” he answered. “They’ll lose valuable time trying to reconstitute all this information, and that’ll give us time to move our routes and get more Arcans out of the east.”

“True.”

They sat down at the desk and carefully searched through the information, paper by paper. Most of it was reports, a detailed analysis of what the Masked was doing, and much of it was right. They’d correctly identified over half of the agents of the Masked doing the buying, and had deduced that the Arcans were being moved out of populated lands. But they didn’t know *why* it was being done, they could only speculate. They were waiting for more information before making that guess, according to the report Kyven had all but taken off the desk of the dead Loremaster while he was writing it. The Loremaster writing the report was convinced that the Masked or the Shaman were somehow involved, and the frankness of the

report said much about what the Loremasters knew as the truth. *“We cannot let it become common knowledge that the Shaman are intelligent and organized,”* the report noted. *“If the Shaman are indeed involved in this, if this is not some move by a power broker to starve the market of Arcans to inflate prices, then we must be ready with a cover story to explain what’s going on, because this can’t be hidden by any conventional method. If we don’t know what’s going on, we need to make sure that we can convince the people that we do with a plausible explanation. To do less would cause us to lose respect among the commoners.”*

It seemed that the Department of Arcan Control served more than one purpose, they discovered. It was responsible for the oversight of the Arcan slaving operations and laws concerning Arcans, primarily ensuring that they remained enslaved and preventing people from treating with any dignity, but they also worked to try to find Shaman. That was basically an impossible job, but they at least tried, for many of the reports in the papers he stole were reports of suspected Shaman activity, descriptions of possible Shaman, and, rather chillingly, lists of Arcans killed because they were suspected Shaman. They were even trying to trace the bloodlines of those Arcans to inspect their parents or siblings. They were very serious about it, though Clover told him that the Loremasters had never actually captured a Shaman, but they’d come close a few times, and had killed several. But Shaman were hard to capture, and even harder to find...but unfortunately, not quite so difficult to kill. The Shaman who had died to the Loremasters had died because they had been protecting others, or died trying to escape when they were discovered. But the reluctance of the Shaman to fight was not misconstrued by the Loremasters. They didn’t see this aversion to fighting as weakness, they saw it as Shaman buying time for others to erase all tracks and bury why the Shaman was there. They knew this because when they did discover a Shaman, they never found anything else, and Shaman couldn’t just walk around. They were Arcans, they required humans to help hide them when operating in Noraam. This was how they knew the Shaman were part of an organized system that was sophisticated enough to vanish whenever it was uncovered. The reports correctly linked the Shaman with the Masked, but they didn’t know about Haven or the

Arcan organization that existed to the west. Their intelligence stated that the Shaman served the Masked, because the Shaman by themselves may be intelligent, but lacked the *sophistication* to set up a large and effective organization. The Loremasters believed that the Shaman were the instruments of the Masked, working for the same goal of freeing the Arcans from slavery, which violated the Loremasters' concept of the natural order of the world, both religiously and politically.

The Loremasters knew that some Arcans were intelligent. They knew they were enslaving sentient beings, but they didn't care. The reports noted that more and more Arcans were showing more and more intelligence, that some were as smart as humans, but that was an unfavorable trait they felt they could correct through breeding...and culling. They found plans in those papers, plans dealing with the crystal shortage, to begin the culling with the intelligent Arcans first, then to ensure that intelligent Arcans weren't bred together thereafter. They didn't want their race of slaves to be intelligent, to *think*, because they felt that the rise of the thinking Arcan was one reason why the Shaman came to be.

Their theory behind the Shaman was that because the Arcans were created using alchemy, they were naturally attuned to alchemical power. They felt that it was a natural trait, like intelligence, that could intensify through breeding, and that the breeding of alchemically suitable Arcans produced Shaman Clover admitted that there was a little to their idea, for the children of Shaman had a much better chance of being Shaman themselves. It wasn't a guarantee, but they did have a better chance.

The reports did confirm one of his suspicions. They wanted to *capture* him if they could, rather than *kill* him...or any Shaman, for that matter. They knew that because one of the reports was sent to them dated yesterday by the Circle itself, seeing if there was any record of the strange powers the invader had, seemingly able to turn invisible, and what suggestions they might have to trap the Shaman the next time he entered the building. They wanted a live Shaman both to study and to interrogate, to help them track down and kill the other Shaman and expose the Masked. Little did they understand that they'd never accomplish that goal. A Shaman who was

captured in that manner only needed a moment of clarity to beg a spirit to kill them, and thus deny the Loremasters their prize. That was why they'd never captured a Shaman, because a Shaman would never allow himself to be captured. In that respect, Kyven shared the Shaman way with his brothers and sisters. If he knew he had no way out, he would kill himself to deny the Loremasters any chance to learn anything from him.

All in all, the information he gathered had been useful, and worth the risk. Now they knew that the Loremasters hadn't yet discovered the truth.

Patches brought them something to eat as they neared the bottom of the pile, putting plates of boiled corn ears in front of them. "No meat," she sighed, looking at the ear.

"I gave it all to Smoke, like you wanted, Clover," she answered, a little defensively.

"I know, little one," she chuckled. "This is no meal for a proper carnivore."

"Coyotes eat anything," Kyven teased.

"You're looking rather tasty, my brother," she countered with a toothy smile. "And I know you won't put up much of a fight."

"Try me," Kyven smiled, showing his fangs and holding up his clawed hand for her inspection.

"Wait. Why fight each other, when there's this small morsel right here?" she asked, turning her gaze to Patches.

Patches gave her a startled look, then laughed nervously. "If you eat me, you won't have anyone to cook for you," she warned. But her eyes went wide when Clover turned more fully in her direction, and licked her chops. "Clover, stop playing. Clover? Clover!" she said in sudden worry as the coyote came around the table, then she gasped and turned to flee when Clover lunged at her. But her squeal turned to laughter when Clover

grabbed her around the middle and picked her up off her feet and turned her towards Kyven. "I've caught our prey, brother, now let's feast!"

Patches laughed uncontrollably as Clover dragged her over to the table, and Kyven licked her hard on her nose. "I get the dark meat," he told Clover.

"So long as I get her liver, agreed."

"Okay, hold her still, let's divvy her up," Kyven told her, putting a claw to her belly, which made her tense up. But when he started tickling her, she broke into uncontrollable laughter, but unable to get away because Clover was holding onto her. Kyven tickled her mercilessly for several moments, then collected her up from Clover and gave her a warm hug, holding her feet off the floor. "Thanks for the food, little one," he told her, licking her cheek fondly.

"It was nothing," she told him, nuzzling his cheek. "Now put me down, I have to clean the kitchen after cooking, and you need to eat before it gets cold."

Kyven laughed and set her down. "We'll be up in a while," he told her.

"Bring the dish up when you do," she ordered as she scurried for the door and closed it behind her, and they heard her close the shelf over the door to hide the secret room.

"She is such a treasure," Clover chuckled.

"I'm just glad she's happy," he said. "But you have to promise me one thing."

"What?"

"When I ask it, you take her and Tweak and leave," he told her as he sat back down. "I don't want her put in any unnecessary danger. When I think it's getting too hot here, I want you to take her back."

Clover gave him a long look, then nodded and sat back down. “Let’s eat this totally unsuitable meal and finish our task, and in the morning we’ll see what Lightfoot brings us from our departed officer’s home.”

“I just wonder if the Loremasters are tearing their hair out yet trying to figure out how the hell I got in right under their noses.”

“Let’s leave that alone,” she said, a bit frostily, then chuckled. “Screaming in frustration, most likely.”

“I hope so.”

Chapter 2

The old, chipped crockery tankard never saw it coming.

The battered old tankard exploded into a shower of flying shards, and a spray of mud and dirt erupted from the embankment behind it, pattering back to the grass along with the crockery shards. The tankard beside it wobbled slightly when a glob of mud landed on its handle, then it too exploded into fragments.

Some three hundred paces away, Kyven and Shario looked on, Shario through a spyglass, as Kyven cocked the lever of the Briton rifle. The Britons were truly advanced with their firearms technology, for the rifle in Kyven's hands was an order of magnitude better than a Noraavi musket. It had a slightly shorter barrel than a musket, but the interior of the barrel had spiraled grooves etched into it that caused the bullet to spin when fired, and that spin made the bullet fly straight and true. The rifle also didn't load through the breech. The Britons had invented these small brass *cartridges* that held all the gunpowder, primer, and round, which made the rifle reload with amazing speed. The rifle could hold seven cartridges, one in the barrel and six in a spring-loaded holding chamber. To cause the weapon to reload, all he had to do was cock a lever behind the trigger, which ejected the brass casing of the prior shot and loaded the new cartridge in the barrel. To load new cartridges into the weapon, all he had to do was slide them into a slotted, covered hole on the side of the rifle, where a spring pushed the next cartridge into position when the lever was cocked, then the cartridge was pulled into the firing chamber. It was absolutely ingenious, this rifle, and its speed of fire and accuracy were almost overshadowed by its sighting scope. Consisting of a spyglass-like tube, the sighting scope magnified what he could see, and there was a little black cross inlaid onto the sights that he could use to aim the rifle. He'd had to manually adjust the scope to match up that little cross the actual rifle, using tiny adjusting screws on the scope

to shift its angle until the little cross matched the actual aim of the rifle. The crosshair wasn't *exactly* where the bullet went, though. He'd found that the bullet actually hit a few fingers below that mark, reflecting the few fingers of difference between the sight and the barrel. He'd tried to match up the sight to the rifle exactly, but he discovered that that changed when the rifle was shooting at targets at different distances. So, to make it uniform, he set it up this way, so his sight was true if he was shooting at something twenty paces away, or a hundred paces away.

In the week since he'd attacked the Loremasters, things were still very tense. His follow-up invasion had sent them almost into hysterics, and though the daytime curfew was now lifted, the night curfew was still in effect and there were checkpoints at almost every other intersection where the Loreguard searched citizens and questioned them as to where they were going, what they were doing, and how long it would take. They were actually trying to track the movements of everyone in the city using those checkpoints, logging everything down and searching for disparities where people said they were going one place or doing one thing and actually did another. Kyven couldn't imagine what kind of paper trail that would create, every checkpoint turning in logs filled with names, times, and information which then had to all be collated, but they were serious about it. But the simple fact was, nothing they had done so far had found the Shaman, so they were trying new ideas to try to track him down. They *knew* he was still in the city. They *knew* he was going to invade them again, cause more damage. One didn't successfully walk into the headquarters of the Loremasters three separate times and not expect to do it a fourth. And so far, the only headway they'd made is that they now knew what the Shaman looked like. Outside of that, they were powerless to stop him, and they knew it.

That was one of the reasons he wanted the rifle. They were now in a very high state of alert, and it would be hard to get close to them, it would be much harder to invade the island again. With this little toy, Kyven could get around the distance limitation of his Shaman magic and attack the Loremasters in a much more mundane manner, but Kyven's unique abilities

would allow him to get into positions where he could use the rifle, and then escape once it was fired. For one, the rifle's shot would never be heard, because Kyven could silence himself, silence the weapon, which would eliminate the single most revealing aspect of using it. For another, he could hide himself both before and after firing the rifle, making it impossible for them to find the shooter. And since the rifle used a different kind of gunpowder that was much stronger and smokeless, there was no telltale cloud of smoke to give away his position, just a small puff which he could easily eliminate with magically-created breeze of air. The only drawbacks to the rifle were that he couldn't hide the rifle when he melded with shadows, meaning he had to use illusion to conceal both himself and the rifle, and also the scope did nothing for his spirit sight. He had to use normal sight to aim the rifle through the scope, so there had to be *some* light present for him to see his target.

Kyven, it turned out, was a natural with a rifle. The same steady hands that allowed him to cut valuable crystals also gave him a precise and methodical aim, and that made him an excellent natural marksman. His sense of aim refined with his daggers and the idea of leading a distant target with a thrown dagger translated to the scope and rifle fairly well, and it only took about ten days of practice with the rifle to get the hang of it.

Tweak became the hero when he got the rifle from Shario. Tweak's alchemy training allowed him to work out how to refill the used cartridges, and it was the thin ferret that took the empty casings Kyven brought to him and used a bullet press from Briton that came with the rifle, and he made the rifle rounds, then he taught Kyven how it was done when he demanded to learn the skill from the ferret. Clover took metal stock and used her Shaman magic to make the metal bullets, then Tweak or Kyven took the bullet, powder, and primer and used the Briton press to make new cartridges. Shario had procured the powder and primer for them, as well as some extra empty rifle casings, which gave them enough casings to make 50 bullets at a time. But what was sobering to Kyven was that these same rifles—without the scope—and the bullet presses were coming to Noraam, part of the deal the Loremasters made with Briton. Briton would supply

them the rifles, casings, smokeless powder, and teach them how to press the bullets themselves, and in return Briton got a large number of uncut crystals and the services of fifty cutters that would sail to Briton and live there for ten years, both cutting the crystals and training Britons in the art of cutting as well. From what Shario had discovered, there were 5,000 rifles coming to Noraam. In the hands of trained soldiers, those 5,000 rifles could decimate any organized Arcan attack, because they could start killing Arcans far outside the range of Shaman magic, giving them the first shot, and a highly accurate shot at that. Kyven had proved that hands down, for he could hit a tankard at three hundred paces using a scope. In the hands of a trained soldier, that would give each soldier a good two shots before the Arcans were in range to retaliate with alchemical weapons.

That was the trade-off. Shaman magic and alchemical weapons were very powerful, but they had a much shorter range than firearms. To use the strongest weapons the Arcans had, magic and their natural strength and agility, they had to be very close. He could see that any battle fought between the Arcans and the Loreguard would hinge on that fact. If the Arcans could close the distance without losing too many of their number, they would win. If they were reduced too much in number before they could bring their weapons to bear, they would lose. That was why he was so glad Danna was there. She would understand that problem and probably push to get the Arcans as many muskets as she could get her hands on, to level the playing field. They would have to fight using muskets and cannons themselves, or remove the ability of the Loreguard to fight from a distance by attacking at night. All Arcans had superior night vision compared to humans, capable of seeing in a moonless night. Night attacks were almost perfect for an Arcan army, when they could see and their human enemies would have a much harder time.

That was how she was going to do it, he was certain. Arm the Arcans with muskets and have them attack at night, when they could see and the humans would need alchemical aids to see them. In that style of attack, the Arcans could close the distance and get within range of Shaman magic and alchemical weapons, as well as engage in hand to hand combat where the

Arcans had natural advantages. Lightfoot by herself could kill a large number of Loreguard if she could get close enough, because she was twice as strong as a human and was fast as lightning. She could kill with her small claws and her raw strength, without needing any weapons. A few dozen fighting Arcans like Lightfoot could wreak havoc on Loreguard lines, but such an attack would almost certainly be suicidal. For them to survive, the fighting Arcans would need support from the Arcans who were serving in the army.

There was definitely a difference between the fighters and the soldiers. Fighting Arcans like Lightfoot were either trained as gladiatorial pit fighters or had chosen to be fighting Arcans. Lightfoot was a freeborn Arcan, born in Haven, but she had trained as a fighting Arcan to serve as a protector, trained in both using weapons and fighting hand to hand. Arcans like Lightfoot were the ones that roamed the lands south and east of Haven searching for invaders or free Arcans. They were the true soldiers of Haven before the army was formed, the fighters, the ones that protected Haven from monsters and invaders. A pack of fighting Arcans was willing to take on a Wolveran or an Ursorax to protect Haven. They were remarkably well trained, and since they were all volunteers, they were very good at what they did. Lightfoot was a typical example of a fighting Arcan; loyal, disciplined, and capable. But there were only a few thousand fighting Arcans among the hundreds of thousands that lived in Haven.

But now there would be soldiers, and lots of them. Clover told him that nearly half the population of Haven had volunteered for service, and though he had no idea how Danna was organizing it, she'd have no want for willing Arcans to fill the ranks of her army.

He hoped that they wouldn't have to fight. That was what this was all about, as he shouldered the rifle and aimed through the scope. The Loremasters were controlled by the Circle, and now, he felt, it was time to take the war to the Loremasters well before they started their march into the frontier. As a Shaman, he had to get too close to kill Loremasters and high-ranking Loreguard. But with this rifle, magically silenced to hide his location, he could kill from a great distance, and then his Shaman and

shadow powers would make him *extremely* hard to find. Kyven intended to be the assassin that the fox had told him he could be, and his target would be anyone with a gold-bordered Loremaster tabard or Loreguard officer's insignia. Any time he wasn't running his shop or trying to invade the Loremaster's headquarters, he'd be hunting them down with his rifle. And when they stopped coming out or started not wearing their rank openly, he'd simply start randomly killing anyone in a Loremaster's tabard or a Loreguard uniform.

He knew that alchemy would allow the Loremasters to deliver their orders to the Loreguard from the safety of their island, but he wanted them all but imprisoned within that island. He wanted anyone who had any rank to be too afraid to so much as step out of a building for fear of being shot by an invisible assassin. He wanted them so afraid that it would cause disruption in their headquarters, that they would be forced to devote resources and manpower to *him* instead of Haven. He wanted exactly what was happening right now on a large scale. He wanted the Loremasters to be prisoners in their own city, and have to expend a great deal of time and energy trying to get rid of a *single Shaman* when they could be using that time or energy on other purposes.

This was war, and that meant that he had to do anything he could to protect Haven, protect his Shaman brothers and sisters, protect Danna, protect the innocent Arcans, and protect his future children.

"Nice, nice," Shario noted as Kyven lowered the rifle. "You certainly didn't take long to master the rifle."

"It's not that hard," he said casually, picking up the brass casing so he could use it later. "What brings you out here Shario? It must be important for you to come all the way out here." And it was quite a way. Kyven was in a small clearing near the Great Falls of the Podac River, some twenty minars northwest from Avannar and well north of the horse ranches for which the region was famous. Shario himself had brought Kyven out here when he'd noted he needed a remote place to practice but not too far from the city, and Shario showed him this place the next day.

“A mixture of curiosity and business, my friend,” he answered. “And my little chef has issued the command for you to come home. It is dinnertime.”

Kyven chuckled. “She keeps us all on a tight leash.”

“Come, my buggy is close. Let us ride home.”

Kyven accepted the ride, stowing the rifle under the seat of the buckboard and climbing up as Shario untied the reins of the two horses pulling it from a nearby branch. “So, I received a letter today from my brother,” Shario began, holding the reins negligently in a hand as he leaned easily back in the chair. “He’s a junior undersecretary in the Flauren Parliament, you know,” he added with a smile and a glance. “Works in the office of the parliament itself, not for any of the *Barrista*, the elected representatives. It seems that the Barristas are taking certain warnings to heart, my friend. The King has accepted the recommendations of Parliament and he’s mobilizing the armed forces.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Do they believe us?”

“Not everything,” he answered honestly. “But what they *do* believe is that the Loremasters have a very large army massing in Riyan, they have no authority to do so according to the treaties they forced upon us, and they have no earthly reason to raise such a force without some kind of objective for it to accomplish. Flaur intends to act first. Next week, my country intends to expel the Loremasters and dissolve the treaties holding Flaur in the Noraam Alliance on the grounds that the Loremasters have violated those treaties.”

“Very bold,” Kyven noted. “Any worry of possible violence with Georvan, Alamar, or Nurys?”

“Nurys,” Shario spat. The rivalry between Flaur and the large city-state stationed at the mouth of the Snake River was as famous as it was bitter, focusing on the fact that Nurys utterly controlled all traffic on the Snake River between the sea and the two cities further north, Alexton and

Bayonne, choking the merchant Flauren off from potential customers, and the city was surrounded by water, literally. It rested at the terminus of the Snake River Delta on slightly higher ground straddling the channel cut through it by the Snake River just before it began to divide into the channels of the Snake River Delta, a city that literally rose up out of deep, dark, dangerous swamps that surrounded the city. Because it was surrounded on three sides by swamp and by the delta on the fourth, it was virtually impossible to invade Nurys by land, and because of that fact, the city-state had one of the most powerful navies in the Waveless Sea. Nurys was said to be a very hot, muggy, unpleasant place to live, where if the heat and humidity didn't make you miserable enough, the clouds of mosquitoes and other biting insects rolling in off the swamps like a living fog could suck half the blood out of a man every night. "They don't think so, my friend. Flauren is quietly approaching the other governments of Noraam and presenting your evidence, which is now unmistakable and unarguable. My people have verified the army massing near Riyan through independent means. They will find that Flauren has every legal right to withdraw from the agreements, because they have been violated by the Loremasters themselves."

"We can only hope that the others have the same sense your people do, Sharion."

"We can only watch and see, my friend," he answered soberly. "Have you fared well this last week?"

He nodded. Since taking in Lucky and Watcher, they had quietly informed Sharion that they weren't available to entertain. They had no fear of Sharion knowing about the boys, it was more for the boys, to give them the chance to both recover and acclimate themselves...and also to prevent Lucky from accidentally saying something to Sharion that the Flauren shouldn't know. Watcher was still recovering from nearly being starved to death, and it was much worse than what had happened to Kyven. Watcher's body had wasted and emaciated from a combination of being locked in that tiny box and getting virtually no food over a long period of time, and it was taking a while for him to recover, even with Clover using a blessing on him

every day to speed up his recovery. Even now, after a week, he could barely walk without assistance, though his body was again starting to flesh out and the trembling palsy in his limbs had ceased. “It’s been rather tight since finding food has been a problem, but we’re alright,” he answered.

“Yes, yes, I’m having the same problem. The inspections at the bridges and the gates of the old city is disrupting the supplies coming into the city, and the merchants have inflated their prices far over the drop in supply. A baker tried to charge me fifteen chits for a single loaf of bread!” he declared a bit indignantly.

“At least some of the people are taking it in stride,” Kyven noted.

Shario laughed. “Yes, the veritable forest of fishing poles that have sprouted up along the riverbanks and bridges,” he noted. “I feel sorry for the fish. I believe they can’t swim a single rod without bumping into a hook.” He ducked under a low branch hanging over the narrow lane. “Any information of note you need to pass along?”

“Nothing really right now. It’s been too dangerous to so much as put a foot outside my shop. I haven’t had a customer since the crackdown,” he frowned. “And I won’t *dare* allow anyone out of the shop except me. Not even Lightfoot, and Trinity is she pissed about it. But it’s way too dangerous right now, not with patrols of Loreguard shooting anything that moves the instant the sun goes down. It’s not a good time to be so much as a stray cat in Avannar at the moment.”

“Yes,” Shario said soberly. “That is something I think you should consider, my friend. When their attempts to find the Shaman come up empty, you know what they will do.”

“Start slaughtering Arcans hoping they kill him through random luck, or at the very least kill whoever is helping him,” Kyven said grimly. “There have been quite a few Arcan deaths as it is, but those haven’t been... *systematic*.”

“I am already in the process of removing every one of my Arcans from Avannar,” he declared. “I am sending them to my cousin who runs a kennel in Hammon, and he will take care of them for me until it is safe to bring them back. The last of them should be safely gone from here by tomorrow. I would normally not presume to give you advice, my friend, but my little chef, and Tweak, they are in very real danger. Clover and Lightfoot can protect themselves, but the young ones...” he trailed off.

“I know,” Kyven sighed. “I’ve been thinking about the problem, and a few others. I might have a problem telling Patches she has to go. Believe it or not, that little red panda rules us all.”

Shario laughed. “She controls the kitchen,” he noted with a sly smile.

“And that’s how she rules us,” Kyven agreed. “I mean, look at us. She sent you an hour outside the city to come get me, and I’m running back home at her command. We’re completely tail-whipped.”

Shario laughed delightedly.

It took about an hour for them to get back to Avannar, as Shario was able to canter the horses after they got on the Atan Road. But they were held up at the gate to the old city, joining a line of merchants and villagers trying to get in. The Loreguard hadn’t closed off the city, but they had instituted these checkpoints to thoroughly inspect anyone coming in or going out, searching for the black fox Shaman. It took them nearly half an hour to get to the gate, and then they were subjected to a half hour of inspection and questioning. Kyven had no reason to lie about what he’d been doing, and immediately told them he’d been target shooting by the river, which was his hobby. That explained the presence of his firearm, which to the Loreguard appeared to be a breech loading hunter’s blunderbuss instead of a Briton sniper’s rifle. Both Kyven and Shario were inspected, searched, inspected again, then had an alchemical device swept over them to see if they were using disguises. A truth crystal was prominently displayed at all times, which was why Kyven simply told the truth, and then their departures were checked against a log, for both of them

had been similarly grilled when they left. Kyven hadn't lied when he left either, telling the guards when he left he intended to go out and target shoot. Shario had been honest in saying he was going out to fetch Kyven, and now here they were, doing exactly what they said they were doing when they left.

Eventually, they got through the checkpoint, and Shario drove Kyven back to his shop. He waved goodbye to the Flauren with a simple word of farewell, and entered his shop through the front door, unlocking it with his key and stepping inside. Clover met him before he could even get the door closed, then switched the sign on the window to demonstrate that he was open for business. He would leave it thus until sundown, but over the last week, he'd had not a single customer. "Clover," he greeted as he handed her the rifle.

"We had a visit earlier," she said seriously. "The Loremaster that brings you crystals, Yoris. He was looking for you."

"Really? What did he want?"

"He had an order for you," she answered. "I told him you had gone hunting, since there is such little food available in the city right now. He said he'd come back later."

"Did he see the boys?"

She shook his head. "Lightfoot saw him coming and warned us. We took the boys upstairs." Kyven could explain the Arcans they knew about because he'd had them since they'd started hiring him. But for him to suddenly have two new Arcans in a shop where he didn't *need* two more Arcans, and in the current Arcan market where even finding an Arcan for sale was a challenge. Even old or unsuitable Arcans were going for over a hundred chits right now, because the Masked had been so amazingly effective at clearing out the Arcans from the kennels, buying them and sending them west. In this current climate, Yoris could not see *anything* that might seem out of the ordinary...and the sudden appearance of two young,

healthy, *expensive* Arcans in a small cutter's shop where they weren't needed would definitely seem unusual.

He stepped into the workshop and patted Patches fondly on the shoulder. "That was a cute trick, sending Shario after me, little one," he told her slyly.

She gave him a shy look. "It was Clover's idea. She wanted you to come home because the Loremasters were looking for you, and Shario had something he needed to tell you, so she had him go get you."

"Ah," he said, glancing at the coyote, who just smiled. "Clever."

"Thank you," she said lightly. "I have little doubt that Yoris has a page watching for you to return, so I'd expect to see him very soon."

Kyven scratched his cheek, nodding. "You should take something to eat up to the boys and have Lightfoot keep them up there," he told Patches.

"I'll take care of it," she nodded, scurrying off.

"Tweak upstairs?"

"Down in the cellar," she answered. "He's putting away the press in the vault."

"Smart," Kyven nodded.

Clover, as usual, was correct, for Yoris arrived at the shop about half an hour after Kyven got home. He shook Kyven's hand as he entered the workshop with four Loreguard and a robed Loremaster Kyven had never seen before. "I'm glad to see you, Yoris, I haven't had a single customer since the curfew," he said. "I need the money."

"Well, you'll earn it, my friend," the bearded man told him. "I have two things here for you. One is a cut job, but the other, well, we want your appraisal of something...unusual."

"Unusual? You've made me curious, Yoris," he said, sitting down at his workbench.

The largest of the four Loreguard stepped up and removed his pack, then produced a cloth-wrapped bundle. “We want you to appraise this, Kyven,” Yoris told him as the man unwrapped it, and produced what had to be a sixty point green crystal, ovoid in shape, and nearly the size of a baby’s head. “We have never seen anything like it before.”

Kyven’s fingers tingled as he took hold of the crystal, peering into its depths. Almost immediately, he could sense the...*perfection* of this crystal. It had no internal flaws at all, and its structure was as dense as possible, meaning that the crystal had the absolute maximum potential for a crystal its size. The exterior of the crystal was the only irregularity about it, and it was literally paper-thin, just enough to protect the interior from the hostile outside. He put it under his magnifying glass to inspect the internal structure, but he didn’t really need to do it to understand just what he was holding in his hands.

He had no doubt at all that this crystal was not natural. It was *made*, one of the crystals made by the Shaman to pay for the Arcans. But he didn’t expect any of them to make a mistake like this. They were explicitly told that the crystals they made had to pass muster to appear *normal*, and that meant no unusually large crystals, no *perfect* crystals, and no saturated crystals. This one was all three.

Kyven knew immediately why they brought it to him, and he knew exactly what to say and do. “I...by the Trinity. Where did you get this, Yoris?” he asked in what sounded like awe as he slowly turned the crystal in his hands under the glass. “This crystal is...is...*perfect*. It has no flaws at all, and it’s got an internal structure that amplifies its power instead of weakening it. I’d bet a hundred chits you could stick it in a device uncut, and it’d power it with no problems. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Neither have we,” Yoris said seriously.

“Where did you get it?”

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss that with you, Kyven,” he said seriously. “But we wanted a second opinion, and your training makes you a very

dependable man to give it. Now, as to the other matter of business,” he said, taking a sixteen point green crystal out of his belt pouch that was very irregularly shaped. “What can you do with this?”

Kyven carefully handed the large crystal back to the guard, then took the crystal. He studied it for a long moment, seeing that it was a well formed trapezoidal symmetry crystal with a very nasty flaw running almost parallel to the longitudinal axis for nearly half the crystal. The crystal itself was well formed and would be easy to cut if not for that internal flaw. “Not much you want to hear,” he said seriously, putting it under his glass. “The central flaw is nearly fatal, due to its position and the shape of the crystal. But...I might be able to do something about it. It’s going to cost you about a point and a half, but I can take that off in a one point sliver which you can probably use. The shard should power a small healing bell on its own.”

“About what our own cutters suggested, but none of them felt confident attempting the cut,” Yoris nodded. “Your standard fee?”

“That’s fine with me. Since I’ve had no work for days, I can get started on it immediately. I should have it done sometime tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’ll have a page stop by a few times through the afternoon,” he said, standing up as the Loreguard carefully wrapped the crystal and replaced it in the pack. “And we’ll add on a hundred chits for your appraisal of the other crystal, which we can pay you now...if only so you can afford to eat tonight.”

Kyven laughed without much humor. “That’s about the truth. You know how much a loaf of bread costs right now?”

“Tell me about it,” the old man grunted. “I buy my groceries at Falcon Square, and dear Father, are the merchants gouging for everything they’re worth! Did your hunt go well?”

“Well, I didn’t hunt,” Kyven said. “I just needed something to do, so I went out by the river up where I couldn’t hit anyone by accident and shot at targets. I might start hunting soon, though, if the price of meat doesn’t come

down. I'm not doing anything else right now with no work, I guess I could go across the river and try my luck out in the forest northwest of town."

"Just be careful, because you're not the only one with that idea," Yoris said. "There's been quite a few accidental shootings over the week, one hunter shooting another thinking he's a deer."

Kyven chuckled. "Amateurs," he said. "Deer sound nothing like men. And if there are really that many up there, there won't be a deer anywhere near them."

"You're an avid hunter, I see."

"When I tried my hand prospecting after buying out my contract, I learned very fast, because it was learn fast or starve after I lost my pack horse," he said. "Hunger is a powerful motivator for learning something."

Yoris laughed. "No doubt. Well, I need to be on my way, Master Kyven. Thanks for the help."

"Thanks for showing me something I never thought I'd ever see," he answered. "I didn't think a crystal like that was even possible, and then you drop it in my lap. It's something I won't forget anytime soon."

"Ah, yes, well, I do hope that you'll keep this in confidence? We'd like to quietly try to find where it was mined, and if word got out of a crystal like that existing, well, wherever it came from would be dismantled in short order as miners stampeded into the region and leveled every hillside looking for others like it."

"I can imagine," he nodded. "I'll keep it quiet, if only because you're such a good customer, Yoris."

He nodded, and Kyven escorted them from the shop, then closed the door and frowned. Someone, somewhere, had screwed up, and showed the Loremasters something that wouldn't exist naturally, a crystal that was absolutely perfect. And since it was both so large and also a rare green crystal, well, the Loremasters would definitely try to find out where it came

from. A crystal that large could power a healing bell that could all but resurrect the dead, or heal an entire room full of men at the same time. Yoris' story about the minesite was nothing but fluff, for Kyven knew better, and he was fairly sure that Yoris did too...but most people believed crystals were a naturally occurring mineral, like coal or iron ore, and would accept a story like that at face value.

Kyven took the crystal to his bench as Clover came back downstairs, and he sat down and put it in the holder. "Well, I have some work now," he told her absently as he moved the magnifying glass and adjusted the lamp over his desk. He already knew exactly how he needed to cut the crystal, and he studied it for a moment to lay out in his mind just how he needed to go about it to cut that large piece off the side that would refocus the interior angles of the crystal to actually *use* the internal flaw. It was a smooth, even planar fault that would actually benefit the crystal if it was cut specifically to utilize the fault as just an internal planar surface. "What's for dinner?"

"I don't know, but probably something I won't like," she answered.

"I guess I can go out and try my hand at hunting tomorrow instead of just target practice," he said. "If there's a deer left between here and the Blue Valley, anyway." He peered through the magnifying glass at the crystal, and adjusted it in the prongs. "You need to have a little talk with someone, sister."

"Oh?"

"That crystal Yoris brought to me wasn't *natural*," he declared. "It has the Loremasters very, very curious."

"They can be curious," Clover shrugged. "Would you give over on that?"

"What?"

"Appearing so ugly!"

He looked down at his human hand, then laughed lightly. “No, because it annoys you,” he said with a slight smile, looking back at her.

“Don’t make me do something about it, brother,” she threatened with a sly smile.

“Biased.”

“Haven’t we established that?”

“I’d rather not have my claws getting in the way,” he said. “It’s easier to hold my tools this way.” He picked up his chisel and hammer. “I think we can let Lightfoot out tonight, because I’m going out as well,” he told her.

“Oh? Where?”

“The pubs and inns are starting to re-open, so I’m going to nose around a bit tonight,” he answered. “I have to keep an eye on things, and you can pick up a lot of information from surly off-duty Loreguard who are drowning their sorrows in pubs.”

“Ah. And what will Lightfoot be doing?”

“Whatever she wants. If we don’t let her out, she’s going to *do something* to one of us.”

“That’s possible,” she chuckled. “What did Shario have to say?”

Kyven went over what Shario had said, about Flaur’s intentions. “It’s just good news for us. If the Loremasters have to deal with rebelling provinces, then it’ll split their attention, and that just helps us. The Flaurens will only be helping us, and maybe we can help them.”

“That we will, when they discover there is organized resistance beyond the Smoke Mountains,” she nodded. “That will force the Loremasters to commit far more forces to maintaining their foothold than they are willing to send because of Flaur. If they openly go to war with Flaur, however, it might get touchy. If the Flaurens fail to sway the Georvans or the Alamari,

or the Loremasters call on the northern kingdoms to send troops south, then the Flaurens may be fighting a superior force.”

“No...I’m not sure they’d do that,” Kyven mused as he made another cut. “The last thing the Loremasters want right now is mobilized Noraam armies that might turn on *them* when word gets out that they’ve broken every treaty they’ve ever made with the twelve kingdoms.”

“It’s all conjecture, and that’s not our job, my brother,” she told him easily. “How long do you intend to be out tonight?”

“There’s still a sunset curfew, so no longer than that no matter what,” he told her.

“I’ll have Patches start dinner right now, then,” she nodded, licking him lightly on the cheek.

He didn’t finish the crystal, so he put it aside and ate dinner with the others, which was a happy and relaxed scene. Lucky had truly fit in with them, for he was amiable and generally carefree and happy, if a bit talkative. Tweak especially took a liking to him, for they had a couple of similar traits in that both of them were energetic and had good senses of humor. Watcher was still quiet and withdrawn, sitting right beside Clover and being given the lion’s share of the meal, which he ate with quiet urgency. Watcher brought out the maternal instincts in both Clover and Patches, and since he’d come to the house, both of them had mothered him outrageously. He was frail both physically and mentally, trying to recover from the trauma and raw terror he had endured in that cage, so Kyven couldn’t blame him for wanting to feel watched over and protected. Kyven himself still had a nearly phobic sense of panic rise up in him if he got too hungry, a wonderful gift to him thanks to Arthur Ledwell.

They wouldn’t be here forever. As soon as Clover felt that Watcher was up to the journey, both he and Lucky would be shipped west, sent to Haven, but not yet. Watcher could barely walk up the stairs, and simply could not handle a journey of that magnitude. But, given the rapid pace at which he was recovering, it would only be a couple of weeks. Clover’s

healing magic and daily blessings were slowly but steadily restoring Watcher's body...but his mind would take longer to heal, and magic would not help that healing process.

After dinner, Kyven went out. He went to a tavern frequented by the craftsmen in his neighborhood, just four blocks away from his shop, called the Hammer and Anvil. Run by a former blacksmith who lost the lower part of his left arm in an accident and had to give up the craft, the place was built inside the owner's former forge and foundry. It wasn't that large, but it did a brisk business and was very popular with the local craftsmen. Veraad had brought Kyven here, and Kyven had found it a nice place to both relax and pick up information. Craftsmen gossiped quite a bit, and that information got around. And by tracking what the Loremasters were ordering from the craftsmen, it gave them an idea of what they were up to. Veraad was there, sitting at a table with a local gunsmith, Brenden, and a fellow cutter named Harn that ran a small yet respectable shop about five blocks from Kyven's own. "Kyv!" Veraad called, motioning him over. He sat down at the end of the table beside Brenden and shook a few hands. "I'm glad you came out."

"I'm glad I came out too," he said. "I've been keeping *very* close to my Arcans."

"I can understand that," Brenden grunted as he took a drink from his tankard. "When the Loreguard searched my shop, they nearly killed Bristletail, my serving Arcan. If one of my apprentices hadn't have got between her and the soldier, he'd have shot her."

"Why?" Veraad asked in surprise.

"Because she's a black wolf," he answered. "They're looking for some black-furred Arcan that's supposed to be a Shaman, and they felt her having black fur was enough reason to kill her. I had to talk very fast and show them her collar was real before they shot her dead and dragged us all to the Black Keep as Masked."

“Insanity,” Harn growled. “I think they’ve completely gone off their porches over this.”

“Well, there *is* a Shaman on the loose in Avannar, Harn,” Veraad said. “Who else could set fire to the Loremaster’s building?”

“I won’t debate that point, but the insanity is all this other shit,” he grunted. “They’re never going to catch a *Shaman* by setting up roadblocks and aggravating the fuck out of us law-abiding citizens. Odds are he’s long gone. If they really wanna catch him, they should just set up around the island. That’s where he seems to go, and it ain’t like Arcans are overly smart.”

“Then how did he get in twice?” Kyven asked.

“Cause the Loremasters got stupid,” he answered. “Arcans ain’t that smart, but a few of them *are* clever, and they didn’t take that into account. And thanks to them being stupid, we all have to be back in our shops by sundown.”

“I can agree to that,” Brenden chuckled as a barmaid wandered over to them. Her name was Didi, and she was the owner’s daughter, a pretty young thing who was openly courted by quite a few regulars in the tavern.

“Ale please,” Kyven told her, to which she nodded and scurried off. “I can agree to that too,” Kyven added. “Sundown curfew, food hard to find and outrageously expensive, no work at all since the crackdown, being treated like a criminal at every checkpoint, Loreguard looking at me like I’ll pull a Shaman out of my pants and have it kill them any second, it’s getting old.”

“You haven’t got any work either?” Harn asked, to which Kyven shook his head.

“Well, I *just* got a contract a bit ago,” Kyven added. “Another Loremaster job. At least this time I didn’t have other orders in front of it to make them mad.”

“It’s been the other way around for me,” Veraad said. “I’ve had a brisk business in shockrods and intruder sensors.”

“I’ve had a run on my pistols and short-barrel muskets,” Brenden added. “People buying protection against both the boogey-man Shaman the Loreguard go on and on about and the thieves. They’ve gotten *bad*.”

“People are getting hungry,” Harn grunted. “Not everyone can afford five chits for a slice of cheese, so the desperate are starting to steal. If the food merchants aren’t stepped on, and soon, the Loremasters are going to be looking at chaos and riots in the streets.”

“Why haven’t the guilds of the food makers put a stop to it?” Veraad complained.

“Are you kidding? They’re making a killing,” Harn grunted. “They took a temporary disruption in the food trade and inflated it way out of proportion to charge outrageous prices. Typical guild skullduggery.”

“Careful there, friend, you have another member of your guild right there,” Brenden chuckled, pointing at Kyven.

“I agree with him,” Kyven grunted. “The guilds are encouraging it, but they’ll get theirs when it’s over. The Loremaster that contracts me was *very* unhappy, so the Loremasters are aware of what the greengrocers and butchers and bakers are doing. They forget, the Loremasters have to eat too, and gouging people is going to get *them* gouged when their greed gets the better of them and they try it on the first Loremaster that’s not in uniform.”

“I hope it comes soon. I admit I’m making a profit in the current panic, but most of it’s being eaten up by food costs. I shudder at those whose business has dried up.”

“Well, you’ll get business from me when I run out of pre-made shockrods,” Veraad said. “But crystals...they’re coming up short.”

“How so?” Harn asked curiously.

“I tried to buy some yesterday in preparation, but the brokers are all closed down. Everywhere. All over the city. I don’t know why.”

“That would explain why we’ve had no work,” Harn growled, as Brenden leaned aside to allow Didi to set a tankard down in front of Kyven. He handed her a single chit, and she smiled and took it before scurrying off. “If the alchemists are busy, you’d think we’d be busy.”

“Yeah, but I can’t buy any crystals,” Veraad said. “I’m going to the broker’s guild tomorrow and try to find out what’s going on. I need to warn my guild as well, maybe they can put an official inquiry in to get some answers.”

“I’m surprised there isn’t one already,” Kyven noted.

“There probably is, but since they have all these controls and checkpoints, we’re just not getting any information,” Brenden predicted. “I for one don’t have a message receiver machine, so the only way I get information from the guild is when I go there. I sure as hell ain’t going to spend two hours trying to get to the north bank to check in with the guild.”

“Send an apprentice,” Kyven chuckled. “They can wait in the lines and just deliver a note.”

“Now that’s an idea,” Harn said. “I’ll send Bucky over to the cutter’s guild tomorrow and tell them I want to know what the hell’s going on. If all the brokers are closed, this may be another guild attempt to drive up crystal prices like they did some twenty years ago. Wait for demand to peak, then open and charge triple list.”

“Hmph,” Kyven snorted. “I’ll just go around the guild.”

“How can you go around the guild?”

“Because I can get them from the source,” he answered. “I’ll send a message to my partner Timble in Atan. Our shop there has extensive contacts with the miners. I’ll buy the crystals directly from *them* and have Timble ship them to me.”

“Now then, I think we might be able to do some business, Kyv,” Veraad said brightly. “How fast do you think you could get fifty crystals suitable for a shockrod here?”

“Three or four days,” he answered with a shrug.

“Well then, if I can’t get any crystals through the brokers, perhaps I’ll buy them from you.”

“Sure. Come talk to me if you can’t get them another way. Timble can buy them for me and ship them on a post wagon.”

They sat around and nursed their ale after that, but not much more of interest was said, just a rehashing of the current state of affairs in Avannar. But the closing of the brokers was rather curious. Either it was the guild doing what Harn suggested and trying to make demand reach a fever pitch so they could gouge, or the guild was forced to make the brokers close for some other reason. Possibly the Loremasters had something to do with it.

Kyven made his way home just before sunset, and entered the shop through the back door and all but running into the arms of Lightfoot. The small gray tabby gave him a rough and short embrace, then licked his cheek. “Well, what did I do to earn such an honor?” he asked lightly, putting his human arm around her.

“Thanks,” she said simply, and she really didn’t need to say any more.

“It was let you out or have you kill someone in a tiff,” he told her, which made her smile slightly. “But you will *be careful* out there, understand young lady?”

“I will,” she promised.

“What do you have planned?”

“The Councilor,” she answered. “He’s still alive. That’s unfinished business.”

He chuckled. “So you’re going to go lurk over by his house and see if he’s brave enough to show up?”

She nodded. “It’s been a week. He may feel comfortable now to return.”

“Careful, kitty, you’re about to use way more words than your mouth can handle,” he said with a teasing smile.

She said nothing, just extended a claw on one finger and tapped it lightly on the tip of his nose, which made him laugh.

After a short meal and spending a little time with the boys, Kyven retreated to an upstairs room and engaged himself in the other main project he’d undertaken since last week. Somehow, the shadow fox had pulled him into the shadows and then caused them to emerge from shadows at a different place, and he was absolutely *convinced* that what she did was not some exercise of her power as a spirit. He had felt it, *felt* it, deep in the core of himself, and that told him that what she did was an exercise of her shadow powers, not her spirit powers. Those were the same powers he had, and she had flat-out told him that he had no handicap when it came to the power he gained from being a Shadow Fox Arcan. That meant that he could learn to step into the shadows and emerge in a different place too, and he meant to discover that power. If he could do that, then he would be a demon unleashed on the Loremasters, able to circumvent all their protections and defenses and literally walk through their headquarters at whim. No secret would be safe from him, and that meant that the Arcans would all but have a man sitting in on the most secret meetings of the Circle.

So, ever his last invasion of their headquarters, he had been spending at least two hours a day up in this dark room, with only a dim alchemical lamp blocked off by two chair backs to provide deep, dark shadows. He sat within one, the one cast by the opposite chair on the far wall was the shadow to which he wanted to jump. He sat on the floor, surrounded by shadow, and did his best to try to recall exactly how it had felt when the fox had done it, and try to duplicate that ability. There had been two stages to it,

he recalled, first the feeling of the shadow going *through* him, then the feeling of it enveloping him. He remembered how the shadows seemed to have consumed everything around him, how he couldn't see anything, and then it was like he was in a small, dark room...then the shadows receded and he was somewhere else.

In the week since he'd been trying, he had made some progress. His awareness of the shadows had increased. He could now not only see them, but *sense* them, almost feel them around him even when they weren't touching him. They were surrounding him, comforting him almost like old friends, and he felt secure and comfortable within the shadowed room. Yesterday, for just a second or two on two occasions, he had felt the cool sensation that usually flowed through his fur flow through *him* instead, in a way that was unusual but not dangerous, which encouraged him because he felt he was making some progress. The fox had said that he *was* the shadow, and the shadows were his friend...and since he'd started this determined training, he saw she was right. The shadows *welcomed* him, they were his allies and his protectors, and they seemed eager to answer his call. That was why he had learned to meld into the shadows without having any inkling of what he was doing or how to do it, it was why the shadows allowed him to control them, manipulate them. They didn't see him as a hostile outside force, they saw him as one of their own, and they cooperated with him willingly. He wasn't just a man, or an Arcan, he was also part *shadow*, and that was the part of him with which he had to make contract if he wanted to learn how to move through the shadows from one place to another.

After nearly an hour, he again felt that strange sensation after almost meditative concentration, not pushing or forcing, just trying to fully get in touch with the shadows around him. He felt that sensation of coolness first wash over his fur, telling him he had melded into the shadow, then it invaded into his very skin and saturated itself into him. The cool sensation then washed through his entire body, almost like how it felt when he used the amulet to take an outward human appearance, and the instant he felt it he focused on it, focused on maintaining it with all his concentration. He opened his eyes and opened his eyes to the spirits and looked down through

the floor to see Patches, Tweak, Clover, Watcher, and Lucky playing some kind of game around the main table, but he then focused on the shadows within the room. He looked to the shadow opposite his, focused the entirety of his concentration on that shadow, and tried to trigger that sense of the shadows enveloping him he remembered from before, beckoned to the shadows with his mind and tried to have them swallow him up and move him across the room.

For nearly an hour, he tried. He managed to maintain that sense of the shadows moving through him, but he couldn't get them to move him to the other shadow. He tried for so long that the door opened and Clover looked in. He looked at her, but saw that she was looking at him with surprised eyes. "What is it, sister?" he asked.

She laughed. "I see you learned a new trick, brother!" she called.

"What do you mean?"

She turned and opened her eyes to the spirits, and a magical pool of liquid seemed to swirl into being. It smoothed out and solidified into a mirror, and he looked at himself through it.

He was a *shadow*!

There was absolutely no mistaking it. His form was visible and apparent, and his eyes were visible with their green glow, but it was also unmistakable that he was *opaque*, that the wall behind him was visible through his body. He was a three dimensional shadow, with border but without features, a silhouette that was somewhat transparent and darker than the shadow in which he sat.

Clover advanced up to him and boldly reached her hand out towards his chest, sliding it through his silky fur on his chest, which was no longer white. "Amazing. I can feel you clearly, but I can see through you, and you aren't there to my spirit sight. I can only see you with my mundane eyes," she murmured. "I can still see your eyes as well, when they are open to the spirits. Another form of hiding?"

“I’m not sure, but it feels different,” he answered, trying to meld into the shadow, but failing. “I can’t melt into the shadows like this, in this... this...shadow form.”

“It’s like you’re a living shadow,” she noted, looking him up and down. “But unlike a normal shadow, I can touch you.”

“And I can touch you,” he said after putting his paws on her shoulders, then sliding them down to cup her small breasts brazenly.

She gave him a slight look. “Don’t start something you may not be able to finish, brother,” she warned with a narrow little smile.

“Hey, I’m experimenting here. Don’t lose your objectivity,” he said teasingly as he kneaded her breasts through her simple shirt.

“Insatiable,” she chided with a throaty laugh.

“Curious, actually,” he said clinically, moving his hands down to her sides. “You feel no different at all. Your shirt feels like a shirt, your fur feels just the same. And I feel the same?”

“Yes, though you appear different, you feel no different,” she said as he dug his hands up under his shirt to put them on her furry waist. “I wonder,” she mused. “You can control shadow, change its shape. Can you do the same to *yourself* when like that?”

He hadn’t thought of that. “I, I don’t know. Maybe,” he said, stepping back on his Arcan legs and holding his hand out. He focused on the hand, but more to the point, he focused on the *shadow* that was his hand, and he tried to control it. He bade it to elongate, like a long shadow across a cobbled street at sunset.

Clover gasped as Kyven felt a curious *fluidity*, like when the amulet the fox gave him transformed him from one shape to another, and his fingers lengthened to a length that was anatomically impossible, nearly two rods long. “I think that answers your question, sister,” he said as he had his hand flatten out. Again, it felt fluid, liquid, and there was no pain as his

hand literally flattened out to the width of a pancake. Clover reached out and touched his flattened hand, and then she probed it with her fingertips. “It feels...pliable, like clay,” she reported, kneading her fingers into his altered, shadowy hand. “But I still feel fur, and I can feel your claws,” she added, touching his wicked claws. “I bet you could slide your hand under a door.”

“I could slide *all of me* under a door,” he said with a sudden smile. “Or between the bars of a jail cell, or into a pipe. This will let me get past some obstacles.”

“At the cost of being visible,” she warned.

“Well, if I’m lucky, I won’t have to worry about that,” he said. “If I can learn how my totem moved me through the shadows, well, let them try and stop me,” he said with a chuckle.

“But this is progress, brother,” she told him, pinching his flat finger. “You have learned a new way to use the gifts she gave you. Any increase in knowledge is an increase in wisdom, and you can never be too wise.”

“I just wish I could be half as wise as you, my sister,” he said honestly. “You are what I believe a Shaman should be.”

“Such a sweet talker,” she chuckled, putting her arms on his shoulders. Kyven lost his concentration, and his hand almost painfully reverted to normal as the shadow bled out of his fur.

“Guess I need to practice this until I get the hang of it,” he chuckled. “But I think I can do that tomorrow. I still haven’t looked over the messages yet.”

“Nothing of real note came in, but I did send on the fact that the brokers are all closed to our friends,” she told him.

“Good, because I think I’m going to be busy tomorrow morning. I’m going to set up on that high building that overlooks the Loremasters’ bridge and see if I can pick off someone important in the morning.”

“So soon?”

“I think I’m ready, so it’s time. I can’t let them get *too* complacent, after all,” he smiled. “I’ll have to try to slink around in an animal illusion, and hope they don’t take much notice of a stray dog.”

“You will be careful, my brother,” she warned. “Right now, they’re shooting almost anything that moves before even seeing what it is.”

“I know. I can go over the rooftops up til I get to the crossing of Ring Street and the Chain Way, but then I’ll have to come down and risk the streets. I know keeping them stirred up will make it harder to get information, but I can’t ignore the fact that if I can keep them off balance and disorganized, hopefully kill their leaders, it’ll make it easier for our brothers and sisters on the other side of the mountains. I have to do everything I can to help the Arcans, even if doing one thing makes it harder to do the other.”

“You will simply find a way,” she smiled at him. “As your spirit said, you are clever and resourceful, my brother.”

“*We* are clever and resourceful. I’m just a member of a team, sister.”

“It’s so nice to be appreciated,” she hummed as she slid a little deeper into his arms.

“Every day,” he said, nuzzling her.

Lightfoot left not long after sunset, and the house settled down for the night. Lucky went to bed early, Patches lured Tweak upstairs, and Clover also went to bed, leaving Kyven with Watcher as he locked up the shop. Watcher was, as usual, watching him, quite intently, and he looked a little unsettled as Kyven put his arm over the boy’s shoulders and helped him to his feet, to escort him upstairs. “Shaman,” he said hesitantly.

“Yes, little one?” he asked as Watcher gained his feet, and they walked towards the stairs.

“Is, is it really true what Patches said about you?”

“Well, I’m not sure what that is, but I think I have a good idea,” he said mildly. “Yes, young one, I’m a human.”

“Really?” he asked in surprise, giving him a look.

He nodded. “This Arcan body was what you might call a very direct and brutal lesson by my totem, the spirit that gives me my power. She wanted me to understand the Arcans, and decided that the most effective way was to make me an Arcan myself. It was a very...unpleasant lesson,” he said after a pause. “But it worked. My time as an Arcan showed me how my people treat yours, and now I’ve dedicated my life to freeing the Arcans and helping them any way I can. I am a Shaman now,” he declared calmly.

“And this talk of a war, you’re siding against the humans?”

“I’m siding against the ones who are wrong,” he said simply. “The spirits don’t hate the humans, my young one. They’re actually very unhappy that war is coming, but they see no other way. The Loremasters are trying to do something terrible, and they can’t be allowed to do it. The spirits don’t want a war between the Arcans and the humans, but they see that a war between the Arcans and the *Loremasters* is necessary. They are our true enemies, Watcher. Not all the humans, just the Loremasters, and those who believe as they do.”

“But all the humans hate us.”

“Not all,” he said calmly as they started up the stairs, which would be a long and slow process. Kyven did not carry Watcher up, since the exercise was good for him. “There are many humans in the Masked, which is a group that tries to free Arcan slaves. They believe that Arcans aren’t the animals that others think they are, and they believe that it’s a terrible thing what the humans have done to the Arcans, so they work to free them and make their lives better. Not all humans are bad, my young one, just as not all Arcans are good. You have to take each race as they come, and then see where they stand after you get to know them a little bit.”

Watcher paused on the steps, his face thoughtful.

Kyven smiled. “You’ve known me a week, my young one. Does your opinion of me change now that you know my secret?”

“Well, it makes me wonder a little bit,” he answered as they started again. “I wouldn’t have thought you were a human. I mean, you’re a *Shaman*,” he said simply.

“I know. I’m the only human Shaman that we know of,” he affirmed with a gentle smile, a hand on Watcher’s back to steady him as he wobbled a bit. “And if you can’t tell me from Clover, well, that makes me very happy, young one. I only learned about a year ago that I’m a Shaman, and I had a lot to learn about it. My spirit didn’t give me much time to learn, and I think she actually cut a few corners. She taught me a great deal about my *magic*, but not a whole lot about what it *means* to be a Shaman. Actually, I’m still learning what it means to be a Shaman. If I’m acting like Clover, then I’m doing it right.”

“What *does* it mean to be a Shaman, Shaman?”

Kyven chuckled. “Shaman serve, my young one,” he told him immediately. “That is our purpose. We serve those who need us. We serve the spirits by doing their will, and we serve the Arcans by being here for you, doing whatever we can to help. If the humans would allow it, we would serve them as well.”

“Well, that’s what you do, not what it means.”

“That *is* what it means, Watcher,” he said simply. “Shaman serve. That is the essence of a Shaman, one who serves the needs of those who need him. The will of the spirits means more to us than our will. The needs of the people mean more to us than our needs. The spirits teach us wisdom so we can represent them in the world, and also so we can be better at what we do. And what we do, my young one, is *serve*.”

“It almost sounds like slavery.”

Kyven chuckled. “I’ve noticed that myself, Watcher. My totem spirit, well, to be nice about it is to say that she’s not actually very nice. The

honest truth about it is she's an evil, cold, ruthless bitch and I hate her, but that doesn't matter. She knows I hate her, but she also knows that I will do my very best for her, because she needs me, and I understand just why she needs me and what I'm doing...and that means far more than my own personal feelings. I serve because I *want* to serve. I could walk away right here and right now, and all it would cost me is losing the chance to be human again...and I think I could live with that. I've actually gotten used to being an Arcan. But I won't, because you *need* me, because the Arcans *need* me. And maybe even the humans need me. The needs of others matter more to me than my own."

"A spirit can be evil?" he asked in surprise.

"You take *everyone* as they come, my young one," he said simply. "Even the spirits. The spirit I serve is evil, and there's no denying it. But *how* she is evil is what counts. She cares just as much about the Arcans and the humans as the other spirits, so in that respect she's just like the other spirits. The evil comes in with her personality. She's a spirit of guile and deceit, my young one, and she cannot go against her nature. She's lied to me, manipulated me, and deceived me since the moment I realized she was more than just a hallucination. She doesn't care about me in the slightest, and if I were to die, she wouldn't shed a single tear, she'd just be annoyed that all the effort she put into training me was wasted. All she cares about is that I obey, and in that regard, she has nothing to worry about. Even though I hate her, despite everything she's done to me, I will serve her faithfully, because *she needs me*."

Watcher looked up at him. "I think you're too good to that mean spirit, Shaman," he said. "You give her everything, and she gives you nothing. That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair, young one. And sometimes, there can be no happy ending," he said sagely as they reached the top of the stairs. "But, she does give back to me. Not in ways you'd expect or notice, but she does give back to me. Now off to bed with you, young one. You need your rest."

“Good night, Shaman,” he said, reaching up. Kyven gave him a gentle hug, and nuzzled him lightly. “Will you bless me before I go to bed?”

“Of course,” he smiled, putting his hand on Watcher’s shoulder and reciting the ritual blessing. After he was blessed, Kyven walked him to the bedroom where all the Arcans slept, they walked past the shivering pallet where Patches was entertaining Tweak and they were trying to be quiet about it so they didn’t disturb Lucky, and he knelt down and helped the frail raccoon into his pallet. “Good night, young one. Sleep well.”

“I hope the spirits bless *you*, Shaman,” he said simply from the pallet.

He chuckled patting the raccoon on the shoulder. “They do, every day I wake up and see that you’re getting better. Now go to sleep.”

Watcher nodded and settled down into the pallet. Kyven watched him close his eyes, then he stood up and made his way out of the room.

Clover was already in bed when he ambled into his room. She sat up and looked at him as he sat down on the edge of the bed, yawning and showing off his impressive canines. “Is he alright?”

“Watcher? Got up the stairs without much trouble,” he answered. “I think he’ll be well enough to travel next week. I was thinking of having him sent to Virren and Timble and let them nurse him back to full health before he went on.”

“I’m sure Virren would be willing to take him in,” Clover nodded. “But it’s not safe for him to be shipped to Atan, brother. He’s too weak, and being put under control of a kennelmaster might do him mental harm.”

“I wasn’t thinking of shipping him with a kennel, sister. I was thinking of...something else.”

She blinked and gave him a look. “No,” she declared. “We understood the risks when we volunteered, Kyven. You will not send us away because you fear it’s getting too dangerous.”

He sighed. “Damn your wisdom,” he said ruefully, which earned him a playful swat. “It *is* getting dangerous, Clover. You have to promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“When I feel that your lives are in imminent danger, you *will* leave. I don’t worry about you and Lightfoot as much as Tweak and Patches. Shario was quite right in pointing out that they can’t protect themselves the way we can. When I think it’s reached the boiling point, I *will* send them home. And I won’t trust them with anyone but you.”

“I...well, in that case, I would be cruel to decline,” she said. “But I would come *back*.”

“And I’d be happy to have your help, sister. Like I said, I trust your ability to protect yourself, and we make a very good team. I’m just worried about the kids.”

“Then when you feel that it is too dangerous, I’ll take them to Atan and return,” she promised.

“That makes me feel better,” he told her, leaning back until he was laying in her lap. She smiled down at him and dragged her fingers through the fur on his chest, then her fingers started tracing lower.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish,” he teased lightly.

She laughed. “Oh, I think I can handle you, my brother,” she retorted, leaning down and licking him playfully on the nose and muzzle. “You still have no endurance,” she teased.

“That sounds like a challenge, sister,” he declared. “But a challenge that’ll have to hold until tomorrow. I *would* like to get some sleep tonight. I have to be up early in the morning.”

“Then we’ll just have a little fun instead of proving that you have no stamina,” she smiled, licking at his muzzle.

“And you accuse me of being insatiable,” he taunted.

“You started this,” she told him, flicking him on the nose. “Think I couldn’t let you pawing me go unchallenged?”

“Well, I’m a man that lives up to his mistakes,” he said lightly, putting his hands behind his head and looking up at her with a sober expression. “So, you’d better get to work.”

She laughed, leaning further down and licking him sensually on his nose, which made his tail shiver. “I think I’m getting somewhere,” she noted playfully.

“Keep going and find out,” he answered.

It was a warm, muggy summer morning, early enough for the only light to illuminate the streets below were alchemical lamps, set to automatically shut off when there was sufficient light streaming in from above. Roving patrols of Loreguard moved between stationary checkpoints, and all of them were edgy and alert.

But, like most men, their attention was focused on the ground, focused on what was near them, on what they could reach.

They never looked up.

Kyven moved with quiet yet confident stealth along the rooftops, for in old Avannar, the rooftops were so close together that one could easily jump from one to another, and the streets were narrow enough that one could navigate the entire southwest sector of the city without having to come down to the streets. Lightfoot had been the one to teach him the rooftop avenues, routes traveled not just by the cat Arcan, but also by Shario’s thieves. Kyven moved quietly yet confidently, hidden behind an illusion that made him appear to be a large cat. Since he was carrying the rifle, he couldn’t meld into the shadows to move invisibly. But, the illusion he chose was very small, which made him very hard to see. Unfortunately, though, he

couldn't get to where he was going along the rooftops. The Chain Way and Ring Street were both too wide to cross by rooftop, so from there, about eight blocks from the river, Kyven had to come down from the rooftops and move on the streets, as the buildings past Ring Street towards the river were large and of different heights, and therefore would be too difficult to traverse.

There were ten men in the intersection of the two large streets, a checkpoint to catch those breaking the curfew that would lift at sunrise which would then stop everyone on the street to search them and log who they were and where they were going, part of the Loremasters' attempts to track him down. They were attentive, paying attention to all four streets from which the intersection, and more than one man stopped to look at the large tabby cat that jumped from a overhanging beam to a porch, then to a horse rail, then to the ground. The cat looked at them, and when one man moved towards it, it turned and ran away fearfully. The behavior wasn't unusual for a cat, so the men thought nothing more of it.

Behind that illusion, Kyven held the rifle in both hands to keep it from hitting anything and stalked slowly and quietly down the street, his padded feet making no sound and his claws being held up and away to prevent them from clacking and moving at a slow pace which would allow the cat illusion behind which he hid keep up with him without it looking unnatural. He glanced back to see that the Loreguard hadn't bothered to chase down the cat, which told him that the Loreguard didn't believe that he could hide in the guise of an animal. So far, the only real idea of his power they had is the ability to conjure shadowy darkness, vanish into that darkness, to turn invisible in the night, and also to take on the guise of humans and use their visages to slip through their building. Luckily for him, they hadn't considered the idea that he could take on the guise of an animal...or perhaps they believed that he could *transform* himself into humans, literally become them, rather than hide behind an illusion of them. That Loremaster woman had touched him, and in that touch she had to believe that he was *human*...or at least was human enough. They had no idea of what he could do, and their assumptions were working in his favor.

He had to agree with his totem. Illusion, the very power of illusion, was one of the most powerful forces, because the nature of it made him mysterious...and that mystery protected him. To never reveal the extent of his powers and abilities, to make them *guess* at what he could do rather than *know* what he could do, it was its own form of protection, and it made him seem more powerful than he was.

The building he intended to use appeared on the street ahead. It was half a block from the river, and its four story height would give him an unimpeded view of the area at the base of the bridge, where a contingent of Loreguard would stop anyone trying to get to the island to inspect them... and that stop to inspect would afford Kyven the opportunity to take a shot at them. The impressive townhouse, in a style called a *redstone* because of the brick facing, had an angled roof with a flat crest that was about a foot wide, and that was the perch he was going to use. He slung the rifle as he went around the house to the back, having to jump a fence, then he started clambering slowly yet confidently up the side of the building, using his claws to gain solid purchase on the wood wall of the rear of the building; the red brick facing was only on the front. He climbed up to the slate roof, pulled himself atop it carefully so as not to dislodge any slate tiles, then climbed up to the flat apex of the roof. The roof was the tallest structure for about five blocks, which gave him a commanding view in addition to preventing anyone from spotting him unless they had a spyglass...and he didn't doubt that there were scouts in the Loremaster headquarters, on the roof and in the towers, who were doing just that. That was one of the reasons Kyven had climbed the back of the building, so he could come up the roof on the protected side. He utilized an illusion of the roof itself once he was at the apex, a covering blanket of illusion that allowed him to settle in a vantage where he was laying partially on the angled roof and partially on its flat top, where he could brace the rifle. He maintained the illusion as he adjusted the scope and looked through it, towards the river, and saw that he had been correct. The height of the building and the angle of the roof was almost perfect, and allowed him a clear view of the base of the bridge to the Loremasters' island headquarters. Thank the Trinity the Loremasters had insisted on a wide plaza at the base of that bridge. Their prevention of

anyone building a building close to the landing gave him a vantage of the landing and the Loreguard soldiers stationed at the base of the bridge that wasn't blocked by a rooftop.

He was in position. All he had to do now was wait.

The sky slowly painted itself in the colors of the predawn, going from black to murky charcoal, and then the purple bloomed from the east towards the west. It was followed by dark blue, and then a greenish tinge, as the sky went through the colors of the rainbow in preparation for the appearance of the sun. Below, on the streets, and in the house beneath him, Kyven could see and hear the common citizens stirring, awakening, preparing to live another day in the city of Avannar. People were standing on their porches, near their doors, waiting for sunrise so they could leave their homes and begin their day. As the sun peeked over the eastern buildings, people did begin to leave their homes, and the streets became populated as they endured the aggravation of being stopped, searched, and questioned on every street corner by Loreguard checkpoints. Kyven remained quiet, hidden under his illusion of the roof, rendering him effectively invisible as long as he didn't move around too much, stayed within the boundaries of his illusion. All he had to do was be patient, because he knew that many important members of the Loremasters and most of the high-ranking Loreguard didn't stay within the headquarters. The majority of the Councilors did live in the headquarters, the highest-ranking ones did, but the lower-ranking ones and the important Loremasters that served the Circle did not. They lived in the city, and eventually, they would come to the bridge to go to work.

He didn't have to wait as long as he thought. Looking through the magnifying scope, he saw a face he recognized approach the bridge checkpoint and barrier. It was that woman, the one that had an unhealthy interest in young pages, and he remembered that she was called to audience with a Councilor.

That qualified as *high-ranking* to him.

He settled himself down completely, relaxing as he slowly, carefully flipped the lever that served as the safety, then actuated the bolt that chambered the first round, a bullet that had been specifically prepared for this. Since he would be leaving something behind, and he might lose a brass casing if it bounced off a roof and to the ground where it would be unrecoverable, those were something they could inspect and also investigate using alchemy. Clover had wiped the bullets and casings clean of any trace they could use to, say, use alchemy to divine a name or face of whoever had touched that item. Since Clover had used her magic on them, they had not been touched with anything but a pair of linen-wrapped tongs...and loading them into the rifle using those tongs had challenged his highly trained manual dexterity. As he shifted, he opened his eyes to the spirits and called down a bubble of silence that *only* covered the rifle, so he could still hear yet the rifle shot would be covered. He then looked carefully through the scope, using his mundane sight to watch as the woman, sitting in an open carriage, stopped at the checkpoint. Her back was to him, wearing her elegant Loremaster dress that, he recalled, showed off quite a bit of her cleavage. The wagon was stopped, and she stood rigidly for a moment....

A fatal moment.

Slowly, easily, he set the crosshairs just over her head, understanding that at that distance, the downward angle would put the bullet somewhere in her middle. He pulled his clawed finger back on the trigger, until he was surprised to feel it buck against his muzzle, a report that had no sound. He lost his sighting of the woman for a second as the rifle recoiled, but he quickly pulled it back down to see if his aim was true.

He clearly saw the sudden bloom of red just between her shoulder blades. She pitched forward off her elegant open carriage and between the two horses, and the horses skittered a little. The men rushed towards her, thinking she had fallen, but then there were startled shouts of alarm audible even from his vantage point when they got her out and realized she had a bullet hole in her back.

Instant chaos.

Alarm horns blew, mirrored by a gong in the Loremaster headquarters, and there were suddenly soldiers running all over the place, pointing in every direction. Men were looking towards the alleys, and a contingent of Loreguard were rushing across the bridge. One of them, he could see from his scope, was wearing the insignia of a General officer.

Target. Kyven worked the bolt to chamber another round, then remembered when he heard the brass hit the top of the roof to pick up the casing before settling himself over his rifle and starting again.

Kyven saw the man was running, and running towards him. Just like with daggers, he needed to lead the man, so he put the crosshairs of the rifle at his feet, moving it with steady, exacting grace as he kept the crosshair set right at the man's boot. He knew that the man would literally run right into the path of the bullet. He again gently squeezed the trigger, then felt the rifle buck against his shoulder as he lost sight of the man. He brought it back down just in time to see the man pitch forward, writhing on the ground, and then the first thin screams of pain drifted up to Kyven's ears. His men staggered to a halt then rushed back to him, turning him over to give Kyven just enough view to see that his bullet had struck the man almost right between the collar bones, just at the base of his neck. The man writhed, his boots scrabbling on the stones of the bridge, then he fell unnaturally still, a blood flowing down towards the base as it followed grade of the bridge.

A high-ranking Loremaster and a general of the Loreguard, dead.

A successful attack.

Just to keep the other men on their toes, Kyven chambered another round and fired it into the throng of Loreguard. He missed the first two shots, as the men reacted to the screaming whines of the bullets hitting the bridge, then he hit a man in the shoulder with the third shot. The other men seemed to realize then that the attacker was still there when they saw a line of blood fly away from a man that suddenly dropped to the ground, and they dove for cover. It was here where Kyven saw that if he kept firing, who

he could hit and who he couldn't would give away his position, so he stopped firing, slid down out of sight on the roof, then created an illusion of a large black cat to hide him as he slid down to the eaves. He hooked into the wood of the building and clambered down, dropping nearly ten rods to the garden behind the house, then he rushed out of the garden and back out onto the streets.

The clanging gong and horns had everyone on the street nervous, and they were milling around, talking to each other, even as the checkpoints at the corners bunkered down, listening to instructions being screamed at them from their alchemical talkers, the way the central headquarters relayed instructions to the roving patrols. Kyven slipped past several of these checkpoints as the men within seemed uncertain as to what to do, but by the time he reached the intersection of Ring Street and the Chain Way, they finally had themselves organized. The checkpoint there was forcing everyone to go back home and lock themselves inside, and they were honest in saying that there was a maniac with a musket or pistol running around shooting people, which made the citizens more than willing to run back home to where they felt it was safe. Kyven used an alternative means to get back onto the rooftops once he snuck past the main checkpoint, the black cat ducking fearfully into an alley, and then once he was out of sight, the black cat seemed to climb up the side of a brothel with impossible speed, until it was up on the rooftop pathways thieves used to get around the southwestern sector of the city.

Kyven breathed a sigh of relief when he gained the rooftops. He was in a position where he couldn't be blindsided, where he wasn't surrounded by Loreguard soldiers. Up here, he could stay out of sight, and if they did somehow detect him, he could get out of the line of fire, had avenues of escape not available to him on the ground that didn't force him to fight... and fighting was usually his last resort.

By means of the rooftops, Kyven moved faster, but still carefully, staying out of sight of the streets by running the middles of the roofs, only coming to the edges to jump from roof to roof. He traversed the length of Jewel Way, then crossed Moon Street, then he turned and jumped onto his

own roof after bounding over the roof of the chandler and the whorehouse. Lightfoot had left the attic window open, and it was by that means that Kyven got into the house. He didn't dismiss the illusion until he was well away from the window, completely out of the attic and on the stairs leading down, then he called out as he came down to the second floor. "Clover!" he called. "Patches!"

Lightfoot padded in from the room they shared, and Kyven started when he saw dried blood on her shoulder. He dropped the rifle and put his hands on her. "Dear Trinity, are you alright?" he asked in concern, touching her shoulder.

"Shot," she said simply. "Clover fixed it."

"I told you to be careful!"

"It was worth it," she said with a toothy little smile. "I got him."

"You killed the Councilor?" he asked, and she nodded simply.

"He came home," she announced.

"I don't know if I should kiss you or wring your pretty little neck!" he said with a rueful laugh, hugging her to him. "Now go clean up, while I go put this where they won't find it."

"What happened?"

"I got that Loremaster woman that likes little boys and a man wearing general's insignia at the bridge," he told her as he picked up the rifle. "Then I took a few shots at the soldiers before it gave away my position, then I came home. It was actually pretty easy. Tweak!" he boomed as he came down into the shop.

The ferret wasn't the only one that came towards the stairs as he came down. He removed the little pouch slung from the butt of the rifle, where he stored the spent casings, and handed it to him. "I need a few more," he grinned toothily.

“We heard the alarms,” Clover chuckled. “We weren’t sure if that was you or Lightfoot’s handiwork.”

“Mine,” he said. “I killed that woman that took an unwholesome interest in me when she thought I was a little boy, and a man wearing a General’s epaulets. Then I took a few more shots at the soldiers to keep them on their toes, and came home. It was pretty easy.”

“No trouble getting back and forth?”

He shook his head. “Lightfoot taught me well,” he chuckled, squeezing her shoulder slightly. “I’m sure they’re going crazy over there right now, and they may even have one of those little flying devices up in the air to search the rooftops for me.”

“So, we become a nondescript shop for a while longer,” Tweak grinned.

“At least until tomorrow,” he said. “Tomorrow night, me and Lightfoot are going...out.”

“Where?” she asked.

“General Bren Fourpost, commander of Loreguard forces in the Free Territories,” he answered. “He lives on the north bank, near the guild of chandlers. I’m sure there are some papers in his house that might tell us when they intend to start moving troops, if he doesn’t know himself. I’m certain between the two of us, we can convince him to talk to us. While they’re running all over the old city hunting for the sniper, it’s the perfect time to sneak over there and see what secrets he keeps.”

“That house? It’s well defended,” Clover warned.

He nodded. “That’s why I need my fighting Arcan, to protect me from the soldiers. Trinity knows, I’m terrible when it comes to that kind of thing.”

“You’re bad, but improving,” Lightfoot murmured.

“Thanks,” he drawled, which made Lucky laugh. “While me and Lightfoot are snooping through the man’s house, Clover, you need to do a little something.”

“Oh? What is that?”

“Someone screwed up and let a crystal only a Shaman could make out where the Loremasters found it,” he said. “We can use that to help Shario and the Flaurens. I think you’re the only Shaman close enough to do it, so I need you to make at least five more crystals like the one they brought. At least thirty points and absolutely perfect.”

“For what purpose?”

“Bait,” he said simply.

She gave him a look, then smiled and nodded. “I understand, my brother,” she said.

“I don’t get it,” Lucky fretted.

“It’s simple, my young one,” Clover said. “We will create those crystals and then have Shario’s people send them *north* and plant them where the Loremasters will certainly discover them. Some place out of the way, say, Two Rivers. That will draw the Loreguard to the north, to find and secure the source of those amazing crystals, giving the Flaurens a little more breathing room when they declare independence.”

“Precisely,” Kyven nodded. “The Flaurens may not be our allies, but they *are* fighting the Loremasters, so we need to help them. And if word of those crystals became common knowledge, it’ll flood the area with prospectors and miners, which will make it *very hard* for the Loremasters to march in an army and take over Two Rivers and keep it quiet. The Loreguard absolutely need Two Rivers if they want to invade Arcan territory, because it’s the only relatively flat northern pass through the Smoke Mountains. If there’s suddenly a huge boom of miners, prospectors, and those who live off them clogging up Two Rivers, they’ll have to devote

a large chunk of forces to holding the city. Every man we tie down on this side of the mountains is a man the Arcans don't have to fight on the other."

"So, Shario needs to ensure that the discovery of those crystals is very *public*," Clover mused.

"And it makes it a little more dangerous for us. They brought that crystal to me, after all, and they know I've seen it. Then, not days later, even more crystals that shouldn't exist are suddenly found. They might see that as more than a coincidence...but it's worth the risk if it ties up a good piece of the Loreguard army into trying to keep control of Two Rivers, and reduces the number of troops they can send west or south."

Clover sat down at the table, tapping her muzzle. "Brother," she said tentatively. "If our main goal is to tie up the Loreguard forces, then might not something *major* do a good part of that work for us?"

"What's on your mind?"

"If we want to help Flaur and also put a wrench in the plans of the Loremasters, then there is a way to do both, as well as possibly help our own cause. Remember the ship you attacked?"

Kyven saw almost immediately what she was saying. "*No*," he hissed. "That would get a lot of Arcans killed, sister! The Loreguard already have a huge army at Riyan, it wouldn't take them long to march them to wherever the Arcans revolted and crush them!"

"Ah, but that's the point," she said. "If a Shaman were to lead the Arcans and took them *south*, to Rallan, and then through the South Pass towards Nash, and there just *happened* to be an Arcan force there to attack them...."

"You mean lead them into a trap," Kyven grunted. "Using slave Arcans as *bait*."

"It will come to this eventually, brother," she said grimly. "The plantation owners and farmers will never sell their Arcan workers. And the

fate of those Arcans is in doubt when the humans discover the truth. You said it yourself, the humans may slaughter them all out of fear. This way, we give our enslaved people a *chance*, Kyven. An Arcan who dies in his own way, by a manner of his own choosing, is not afraid to die, you know this. We should give the slaves the *choice*, and that they will help both us and the Flaurens at the same time is simply bonus.”

“I...I don’t like it, sister.”

“I don’t either, but it’s something we must consider. Will you present the idea to the council and Firetail?”

“I, alright,” he sighed, remembering the most important of all of his totem’s lessons to him; *for some, there is no happy ending*. He had to consider the alternative. The council and Firetail were wiser than he, Danna was a better general than him. He would let them make that decision. It wasn’t his to make. “I don’t like it, but do it.”

“Let me take that, Kyven,” Tweak said, taking the rifle. “I’ll refill those casings right after breakfast.”

“Yes, breakfast, that sounds good,” he said, shaking off a feeling of... foreboding. Clover’s idea was suicide for quite a few Arcans, but something...something told him that he’d be seeing that idea again.

Very soon.

Chapter 3

He'd never done anything quite like this before, and that made it both frightening and oddly exciting.

It was a dark, cloudy, moonless night, so dark that if it weren't for the street lights of Avannar, Kyven and Lightfoot may have trouble seeing. As it was, though, the lights on the corners and halfway between each corner gave them just enough light for Lightfoot to see clearly, while Kyven was relying on his spirit sight in order to navigate.

They'd spent all day preparing for this. Kyven had reconnoitered the general's house that morning clandestinely under the pretense of going to the guild, and had seen that the man's house was more of a walled compound than a house, a walled-in property that held a fairly nice house and a small greenhouse for his wife, who was a passionate gardener well known for her roses and her greenhouse garden that produced vegetables and tomatoes all through the winter. The place not only held the general, his wife, his four children, and his two human servants and three Arcans, but it also held six Loreguard soldiers who guarded the officer and his home.

This would definitely be delving into the area of *no happy endings*. Both Kyven and Lightfoot understood that under absolutely no circumstances could *anyone* see Lightfoot and be allowed to live. If they linked Lightfoot to Kyven, then that would bring them right to his shop, since Veraad knew of her and he wasn't sure if Yoris or the Loremasters and employees of them with whom he often dealt had ever seen her. In this, he had to be absolutely ruthless, and he knew it. If the general's ten year old son saw Lightfoot, he had to die. Kyven didn't hold much of a candle to slaughtering a child, but there was no room for error in this dangerous game he was playing. Anyone who saw Lightfoot could unveil Kyven's secret to the Loremasters, and that could not be permitted, no matter what he had to

do. Kyven intended to partially assuage that grim possibility by covering Lightfoot in an illusion and leaving himself uncovered. They already knew what he looked like, so they'd gain nothing by someone seeing him again. So, his idea was to conceal *Lightfoot's* identity, making her appear to be an ultra-rare kind of Arcan Clover described to him called an *ocelot*, some kind of small spotted cat native to the continent south of Noraam, which was called Mecana. So, instead of Lightfoot appearing as her white-gray furred and bone-white haired self, she appeared as a tan cat with both spots and bands in her fur, a short, thick muzzle, long, dark hair, and penetrating yellow eyes. To reinforce it, the illusion was also about half a rod taller than the petite cat, but he kept her a cat so one wouldn't doubt the illusion if she used her claws.

Clover had dealt with the Masked cell in Avannar to somehow dig up information of the general's home, a general kind of layout that one might expect a servant to know. How the cell got that information was beyond him, and he hoped that it didn't give *them* away if someone had knowledge that they had that information and then the general's house is attacked. But thanks to them, the two of them had a rough idea of the layout of the general's house. They knew where the general's family lived on the second floor, they knew that the wife spent all her time out in the garden from sunrise to sunset, tending both her food plants and her rare or experimental plants she cultivated, and they knew that the three Arcans all lived in a small shack behind the greenhouse when not actually working, primarily helping the wife with her gardening. They didn't have information on where the guards would be stationed or what kind of alchemical defenses the house may possess, but Kyven would be able to ferret them out with spirit sight once they got there. They knew that only the guards would be awake at this time of the night, halfway between midnight and sunrise, and if they moved carefully enough, they could eliminate the guards without rousing the house, and therefore have plenty of time to chat with General Bren Fourpost, commander of the two Free Territories regiments of the Loreguard Expeditionary Forces, the official name of the segment of the Loreguard that were common infantry.

Thus far, it had been relatively easy going, mainly because the darkness made the shadows away from the lamps deep and protective. By manipulating those shadows, Kyven had gotten them through most of old town unseen, and all the way to Beggar's Bridge, where their first major obstacle had to be conquered...the checkpoint that literally blockaded the bridge. Lightfoot's solution that problem was both simple and effective, and Kyven had to agree when she led him away from the bridge and to a small quay that extended out into the river about a block from the bridge. There, they stole a small rowboat, and crossed the river in the darkness using their boat. There were lights on the bridge, but it was so dark that the lights didn't even illuminate the water underneath the bridge, let alone a rowboat a block away. Kyven had never rowed a boat before, but he managed to figure out that he had to angle the boat partially upstream to keep the current from pushing them towards the main docks southeast of their position. By using magic to silence the oars, but not the entire boat, they moved with confident stealth across the river.

Once on the north bank, however, things got more serious. The streets of New Avannar were wide and spacious, and there were many more streetlamps, which made it much harder to move around unseen. The checkpoints and roving patrols made it much harder on top of that, but Lightfoot was again prepared. New Avannar had a feature not seen in Old Avannar, and that was alleyways between the blocks that ran from east to west. The houses of the new city were large and spacious, and most had carriage houses or even small one horse stables behind the houses. This was an aesthetic affectation, leaving the fronts of the houses and yards to each side uncluttered by such things. Putting them in the backs of the organized blocks created narrow alleyways between the houses facing the streets to the north and south where families actually entered and left their homes, making the front door, porch, walkway and gate at the edge of their lawn more ceremonial or formal than functional. The Loreguard naturally knew about the alleys and kept a pair of guards at the intersection of every alley and street, but that meant very little to them, because there was *plenty* of open space between the alleys and the houses. They would slip into the yard of the house at the end of the alley, get halfway between the alley and the

street intersection further down, then slip across the street and over the fence on the other side under the safety of an illusion that made both of them appear to be a single mouse.

It was a major strain for Kyven to conceal both of them under such a *tiny* illusion, because in actuality such small illusions were much harder to maintain than large ones when he had so much area to render *invisible* by means of the fact that to the illusion, that space was not filled. But it did just that, it made them appear to be a mouse, and a mouse was a very hard thing to see from a quarter block away on a dark night.

It took them about an hour to get to the walled compound that was the general's house. It was on the far side of the block from the guild of chandlers, and just two blocks away was the guild of crystal brokers...and that was another curious thing they'd discovered that day. It seemed that the Loremasters had shut down the brokers, over what the crystalcutter's guild said was a matter of formal inquiry, and the brokers would all be open either tomorrow or the day after. Kyven suspected wasn't entirely sure what they were up to, because he doubted that they'd gotten that perfect crystal from Avannar, and it was something he'd have to investigate later, when he had the time.

They paused just across the street from the compound as Kyven both melted into the shadows and covered Lightfoot in the illusion, then he scanned the compound with spirit sight, taking stock of the place. He saw several magical blooms inside that marked alchemical devices, and saw *twelve* guards moving around. Several humans were up on the second floor of the nice house, reclining; they were asleep or laying down. The main gate and the walls of the compound glowed with faint magical radiance that he had to peer through to see those behind it, telling him that the wall and gate were alchemical in nature, but he couldn't tell what function they possessed.

“Well?” Lightfoot whispered.

“Twelve guards. Six static, six roaming. The walls are alchemical. Several alchemical devices inside the house, but they look like appliances, not weapons or alarms. There are several sleeping figures on the second floor with a single human standing watch near where I think the stairs are,” he reported in a bare whisper as he strained his eyes to look towards the greenhouse. “Three forms sleeping behind the greenhouse. The man’s Arcans.”

“Where?”

He knew Lightfoot enough to understand what she didn’t say along with what she said. “We should jump the wall behind the greenhouse,” he whispered back. “We can eliminate two static guard positions from behind and then ambush the others as we move forward. Remember, the further you get from me, the harder it is for me to hold that disguise, so try to stay close. Ready?”

She nodded. “Let’s go.”

Getting past the wall wasn’t that hard for two Arcans as physically fit as Kyven and Lightfoot. Simply put, they *jumped* the eight rod tall wall, clearing it completely and without touching it. They landed soundlessly on the lush, thick, well-maintained grass of the lawn between the wall and the shack holding the Arcans, then both of them dropped down to all fours and slinked forward on utterly silent hands and feet. They ghosted past the shack and the greenhouse, and came up to a very ornate pair of double glass-paned doors that led from a lavishly appointed patio into what looked like a musical conservatory within the house, holding a harpsichord, a harp, and a Eusican *plava*, a series of small metal bars of escalating sizes lined up on a horizontal stand that were struck by small wooden mallets to produce chiming notes. Kyven pointed to the far door, then held up two fingers to denote that that was a guard position. Lightfoot nodded as she slinked up to the door, rose up onto her feet, and produce a couple of small probes from her belt. Those were her lockpicks, and she went to work on the door, her little probes making very faint sounds as she worked them into the lock. Her clawed fingers moved with delicate precision, then she twisted her tools in

the lock, which made it turn, unlocking the door. Kyven nodded as she slowly put her hand on the door, and Kyven channeled silence on the door to prevent it from making any noise as it was opened.

Kyven entered first, padding in on all fours, advancing on the door leading from the room, which glowed with a very faint magical aura. The door itself was alchemical in nature, and it was his turn to do his work. He put his hand on the door and opened himself to the crystal hidden within the wood-paneled door, which was framed with bronze and tin that formed the alchemical device. He siphoned off the power of the crystal, draining it into himself, and holding that power inside himself to use to power magical spells if needs be, spells that would not tire *him*, would instead use up the energy he absorbed. He nodded to the cat and rose up onto his feet as he channeled silence over the door, then pointed to each side of the frame deliberately, warning her where the guards were. She nodded, then held up her hand, showing all five fingers. She then tucked one in, and he realized she was counting down.

He followed her count. When she hit zero, he opened the door slowly, peering through the crack to see the side and partial back of a Loreguard, where he stood beside the door that was at the end of a passageway. Lightfoot slinked under him as he creaked the door open wider, then she lunged with amazing speed even as he lunged forward and turned to get the other guard. Lightfoot drove her claws into the man's throat, and all he made was a gurgling sound as he collapsed under her lighter weight as she all but pounced on him. The other man started in surprise, but that moment of surprise prevented him from calling out or raising an alarm as Kyven's clawed hand closed around his throat. Kyven was a Shaman, so he had been physically conditioned for muscular power, and that power crushed the man's throat. He pushed the man down and pinned his legs to the floor as his face turned blue and he squirmed and convulsed out the last of his life, and then his body went limp and a thin, reedy sigh managed to escape his crushed windpipe.

The attack took less than twenty seconds, and the two guards died silently. Kyven and Lightfoot dragged the bodies into the conservatory, and

Kyven stripped his victim of his shockrod, pistol, and his alchemical talking device, which was how the guards communicated with one another. Lightfoot took the other guard's shockrod and pistol as well, attaching their holsters to her belt to join the shockrod and pistol she commonly carried.

"You're amassing quite a collection there, Lightfoot," he whispered as he pulled a cover from the back of a chair, then advanced to the door and wiped up the blood from Lightfoot's kill that was smeared on the floor. Two missing guards wouldn't raise an instant alarm as would a bloodstain where the guards were supposed to be.

"One pistol, one shot. Two pistols, two shots," she murmured.
"Ready?"

"Let's go."

With Kyven guiding them, the two of them systematically cleared the first floor of guards. They killed them all, by either ambushing the static positions or laying in wait for the roamers. They moved both quietly and quickly, killing guards before the roamers realized that men were missing, then killing those roamers when they moved towards where the static guards should have been. Kyven did not use Shaman magic to kill, relying instead on his claws and his Arcan strength. The entire process took only about ten minutes, when they killed the two guards stationed at the base of the stairs, whom they had saved for last just in case someone upstairs got up and happened to glance down the stairs as they moved about. There were two guards left, upstairs, as was the general and his sleeping family.

"What's going on down there?" a voice came over his talker, even as they heard the chimes of a clock upstairs announce that it was three in the morning. "Price, you missed the check-in...and the rest of you jesters don't have to wait for him to go first!"

"Quickly," Lightfoot said in a bare whisper.

He knew she was right. When *nobody* answered that guard, he was going to sound an alarm. They had to get to him and kill him before he did

something that brought every patrol of Loreguard in the New City down on the house. The two of them ghosted up the stairs on all fours, until they heard both the voice making the call and the call through their talkers. “Where are--who’s coming up the stairs without announcing?” he barked. Kyven’s eyes ferreted out the man in a room near the stair landing, which hid the stairwell from the room by a wall. He pointed in that direction as they came up onto the carpet of the second floor, then slinked silently up to the door holding the last two guards. They were sitting at a table, both facing the door. He held up two fingers to Lightfoot. “Facing the door.”

“Yours,” she breathed, slinking back a step.

He knew what she meant, and knew she was right. Centering himself, bringing the spell clearly to mind, he rose up on his legs and took hold of the doorknob, started to very slowly turn it so he could push the door open suddenly...and found it locked.

“Locked,” he whispered.

“Silence it,” Lightfoot ordered as she replaced him in front of the door and withdrew her thieving tools from her belt. He did so, silencing the lock so she could pick it without the sound alerting those within, but those within were getting anxious. “Someone report in!” came the voice over the talker. One of them stood up, and the other reached for something at his waist, something Kyven couldn’t see, but the way he was holding it hinted that it was a pistol. They were smart enough not to use alchemical weapons against a suspected Shaman. He looked closer, and realized that there was a *darkness* just in front of the man’s hand, and he realized that there was a sliver of black crystal loaded into that pistol. That meant that it would kill whatever it hit instantly, even if it just barely grazed a finger.

That would make this tricky.

Lightfoot finished with the lock and sidestepped out of the way, and Kyven decided to just go for it. He silenced the entire door and pushed it open *just enough* to allow him to put his hand through, and give him a line of sight to both men. They were sitting at the table, and neither of them had

noticed the door open because it made no sound. The one holding the pistol did look up as the door opened wide enough for Kyven to see him, and he reacted immediately and with surprising swiftness, raising his pistol at the opening door.

But he was too late. Kyven channeled a withering blast of cold from his hand, a cold that rampaged into the room and slammed into the two men. Both of the men, the pistol, the desk, the chairs, even the carpet under them, all rimed over with a bluish frost, and both men were literally frozen in mid-movement, the pistol-wielder frozen literally in the act of pulling the trigger.

“Close,” Lightfoot breathed as she looked in.

“Take the shooter’s pistol, it has a black crystal bullet,” he whispered, looking at the door past the men, which was the door to the general’s bedroom. The room they were in was a combination parlor and office of sorts, with a writing desk and shelves on one side, the chairs and tables placed deliberately in the middle of the room, and a pair of couches near a hearth on the other. “Ransack the desk and shelves, look for any official documents. I’ll go pay a visit to the general. When you’re done, stand in front of the door and wave until you get my attention, but don’t come in. I don’t want him to see you.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m keeping him alive.”

“Why?”

“To feed false information to the Loremasters,” he said with a wolfish smile. “I’ll load him up with some information that’ll send the Loremasters running in the wrong direction, which’ll help everyone else. When you signal me, be ready to run like hell. We have to make it look believable that he survived the attack on him.”

She nodded simply, then advanced on the frozen man. Instead of trying to wrest the pistol out of the man’s frozen hand, she simply broke the man’s

hand off at the wrist and started working on breaking the packing wad from the breech of the pistol to free the bullet behind it, using one of her little probes because she knew better than to touch that bullet with her bare hand.

The bedroom beyond was fitting of a high-ranking member of the military. It was richly appointed but not lavish, with elegant furniture of exceeding quality but also of practical use. Rich velvet curtains hung from the corners of the four-poster bed, curtains drawn to let air flow in the summer night, drawing in through an open window and circulated by a slow-turning fan on the ceiling, an alchemical device that circulated the warm summer air. The room was large and spacious, the furniture not detracting from that feeling of space. There were two figures in the bed, a middle-aged woman with a slightly plump figure and a grizzled, gray-haired man. General Bren Fourpost, commander of all Loreguard forces in the Free Territories.

A hand to the general's mouth snapped him awake in a heartbeat, and his eyes widened when he stared up into the glowing eyes of a Shaman. "Wake your wife and she dies," Kyven breathed in a very low whisper. "Get up."

The general moved with quiet and slow care, sliding out from under the covers and slowly gaining his feet, looking fearfully at Kyven while glancing towards his wife. Kyven channeled silence over the woman to keep her oblivious to the sounds of the room, then dragged the general to the padded chair in front of a vanity and pushed him into it. "I placed a spell over your wife so our talk won't disturb her. I've already ransacked your office out there, but now I want to see if what I read matches up with what you know. So, now, you and me are going to have a little chat, General," Kyven told him. "Your honesty ensures that when I leave here, your family is still alive. Every time you lie to me, you lose someone. When you run out of family to die in your place, it will be your turn with your next lie. I know you're a brave man, General, and would willingly sacrifice yourself for your family. But remember, you'll die *last*. The first to be killed will be your youngest son, then we'll just work our way up the ages until we get to

you. So, you can die nobly for the Loremasters, but you'll take your entire family with you."

"I knew you Arcans were *animals*," he spat.

"We are what the humans made of us, General," Kyven said simply. "If you hate my barbarism, blame the humans who walk down the street wearing the skins and fur of my people as clothing, or force my people to fight each other to the death for their amusement. You hold no value for the lives of my people, so don't expect me to have much value for the lives of yours."

The general glared at him, but said nothing.

"Now, there's an *awfully* large force of Loreguard massing in Riyan. I'm mightily curious to know why they're there, and what they're going to be doing. Your Loremasters would have no earthly reason to spend the chits to raise an army of that size without having a purpose in mind for them. I believe that it might even be a breach of the treaties the Loremasters have with the kingdoms of Noraam."

"Why would a *Shaman* want to know that?" he hissed.

"Because I'm being well paid to be curious, General," he answered smoothly. "I think you know you won't live to see the sunrise, so I may as well be honest with you. Phion managed to lure me into a meeting with them, because they unearthed a cell of the Masked, and that cell summoned me. But instead of attacking me or killing me, they instead *negotiated* with me, human. They offered me a *very* lucrative deal to hire my services."

"Liar! No Shaman would work for humans!"

"When Phion promised to free a number of my people equal to the number of Arcans in slavery in Phion in return for my assistance, yes, I would work for humans, General," he said simply. "The spirits deemed it a fair bargain and agreed to allow me to make it. They already carried through on their side of our agreement, and so now I carry through with mine. They have been buying Arcans and freeing them...which is why the

Arcan markets have gone dry. Phion has done a good job hiding the fact that they're buying all the Arcans, and I made sure their activities won't be discovered. The Phioni buy the Arcans, then let them go. I've seen documented evidence they're doing it, which was the signal to me that they have honored their word, and now I honor mine. I invaded the Loremaster building and destroyed the evidence the Loremasters were massing about Arcans being bought to hide Phion's involvement, and now that Phion is protected, I'm going about finding out what they're most interested to know. So, in return for my services, I have freed tens of thousands of my people, who I hope will stay away from humans and remain free for the rest of their lives."

The general's face turned pensive, and then stony. He saw a sliver of possibility in Kyven's deception. He didn't believe it completely, Kyven could see that, but it was *just plausible enough* for the general to accept it for the moment.

"So, if I seem unnaturally curious about Loremaster troop movements, at least now you know why. And you will answer the question," he prompted in a neutral voice, yet dripping with veiled threat. "Why are the Loremasters massing an army near Riyan that they have no legal right to raise? What purpose will it serve? And when will it serve that purpose?"

The general gave him a long, searching look, no doubt weighing Kyven's threat to kill his youngest son against his loyalty to the Loremasters. "That army isn't under my command," he answered. "It's under the command of General Abram Bell, High Adjunct to the Circle. I haven't been in the meetings about exactly what the army is going to do, I can only tell you what I've heard in rumor and through my own briefings."

"Go on," Kyven prompted, sitting easily on a high-backed chair near the general's chair, turning it around so the back faced the general and leaning into it, leaning his forearms on the back of the chair easily. The casual, relaxed posture didn't give the general any courage to make an escape. He would know much more about Shaman than the average man, so he would know that Kyven could kill him without moving a single muscle.

So long as Kyven's eyes glowed, the general knew that the Shaman could snuff out his life in an instant. Both of them glanced towards the bed when the woman shifted, turning on her side, and that made the general breathe a sigh of relief.

"My own orders tell me that something major is about to happen out in the mining districts," he began. "I've had to draw up a troop disbursal plan and a plan of action for those troops through all the mining villages, but focused specifically on Atan, Harpan, and Two Rivers. The forces are supposed to defend the villages. I've been ordered to draw up plans to fortify each village against possible attack and secure supply and communication lines between each village and Avannar, as well as with each other. But I haven't been told *who* is going to doing the attacking," he fretted. "Though if the Phioni hired you, maybe now I know where the attack's coming from."

"We're not here to dwell on that kind of conjecture, General," Kyven said calmly.

"The plans are all done and submitted and approved," the man continued. "The first elements are scheduled to deploy in two weeks, on the first of July. Advance elements of engineers and alchemists to begin surveys and start construction on fortifications."

"And when do the troops arrive in force?"

"Through mid-July," he answered. "Since we can't find Arcan labor, the soldiers themselves are going to be doing the majority of the work shoring up the defenses."

"Why, the Loremasters own *thousands* of Arcans, General. Whyever can't you just use them?"

"Because they've been claimed for another project," he answered. "Soldiers aren't the only thing being massed in Riyan. Just about every Arcan wearing a Loremaster collar is being moved to Riyan. The High

Kennelmaster told me so himself when I went there to try to get some Arcans for the construction.”

Kyven tapped his muzzle absently. That matched the information they had so far, that the Loremasters were desperately trying to find Arcans to use as slave labor. It was only logical that the Arcans the Loremasters owned, which were scattered all over Noraam, were being centralized in preparation. If they were pulling in all their Arcans, then they would be moving out soon.

Very soon.

“I think that army will be moving soon. They won’t want to keep a bunch of Arcans in one place for long without using them, because they’re eating food and doing no work. They’ll probably start moving out in a month,” the general noted, to which Kyven nodded in agreement.

“And you have no idea where that army is going?”

He shook his head. “Whatever that army is going to do, it’s being kept quiet,” he said. “There’s only rumor, and the rumor is a bit wild, but it seems logical to me.”

“What’s the rumor?”

“Word’s come through the vines that the geographers have been focusing on the unexplored territories west of the Smoke Mountains, and the current popular rumor is that the intelligence arm has uncovered a plan to attack Avannar by marching an army *west* of the Smoke Mountains, through one of the two passes, and then into the Free Territories. It’s got some truth to it, if you ask me. All the army would have to do is dig in along the passes and an enemy army would have a hell of a time getting through. That would also explain why they need the Arcans, to build large-scale fortifications in the passes, and why the Loremasters raised such a big army. Avannar is *Loremaster* territory, and we have the right to defend it. It also explains why they had me draw up a defense plan for the Free Territories and focus on defending the mining districts. That army can still

march over the mountains in smaller groups that don't need wagons and harass the settlements along the border, and it's our duty to protect the Free Territories from invasion." He looked down. "If the kingdoms are starting to send *Shaman* to Avannar, then maybe the rumors are true."

"What rumors?"

"That some kingdoms are starting to drift from the teachings of the Trinity," he declared, a bit defiantly. "They've been saying for years that those dirty star-worshipping Eusicans have started coming over here and setting up underground churches. If Phion really did make a deal with a Shaman, they're not walkers of the path of the light," he spat.

"Your Loremasters were certainly fast enough to make a deal with those dirty star-worshipping Eusicans to get their hands on Briton rifles," Kyven noted lightly.

The General gave him a hard look.

"Really, you think we don't know what's going on?" he asked with a light, scornful chuckle. "It took me about a week to dig up most of the secrets of your Loremasters, human, there's only a few of the better-kept ones I'm digging to uncover. You have *no idea* what I'm capable of doing, General. All your defenses in your headquarters were at least laughably amusing to me, and at most a minor inconvenience. Watching your Loremasters run around like chickens with their heads cut off has been very entertaining," Kyven said with a short, low laugh. "The Shaman have avoided conflict with the humans because the spirits forbade it, to prevent conflict between humans and Arcans as the spirits sought some peaceful means to free the Arcans from human control. For some reason far beyond me, the spirits care about the humans and don't want a war between your people and mine. But since war is coming to Noraam, the spirits have finally released the leash and are allowing us to act, to try to mitigate the loss of Arcans in the war to come. I made a deal with the humans to save the lives of my people, human, because when the war starts, they will be the first casualties, even if the Arcans won't be the direct target."

“War? What war?”

“The war your Loremasters are preparing for at this very moment, human,” Kyven said simply. “You do understand exactly *why* Phion went to the extreme of getting me to work for them, don’t you?” he asked lightly.

The general gave him a stunted look.

“The crystals are running out, human,” he declared. “There isn’t an endless supply of them. Every day, fewer and fewer are coming up from the mines. Phion knows it, the Loremasters know it, most of the kingdoms of Noraam either know it or suspect it. The Loremasters are bolstering the defenses of the mining districts because, soon, those will be the *last* regions of Noraam that still produces what few crystals there are left. So the Loremasters are preparing to hold them when the other kingdoms, knowing that without crystals they will be destroyed, invade the Free Territories to try to claim the last crystal-producing region on Noraam. What do you think will happen to my people when your slavers can’t find crystals to put in their collars, human? The spirits have sent me to try to save as many of my people as possible, so they allowed me to work for Phion. Thanks to them, tens of thousands of my people who would have been slaughtered will now live. That, I think, was a fair bargain between the Shaman and Phion.”

Kyven let that sink in, leaning on the back of the chair. “That’s why Phion hired me. *They* want the mining villages of the Free Territories, human, because whoever controls those mines will literally control Noraam. And now that we have confirmation that the Loremasters have sniffed out their intent and are moving an army out to repel the attack, odds are they’ll make their move *before* your Loreguard can take control of the region. While your armies prepare to repel an invasion from the west, they’ll be blindsided by the invasion from the *north*. Ironical, isn’t it?” Kyven chuckled.

“You’re lying,” the general hissed.

“Maybe. On the other hand, maybe I enjoy watching you struggle with hearing what I have to say and knowing that it’s true, that all the rumors you’ve heard matches up with everything the Loremasters are doing, and

now it makes sense once you fit that little piece of the puzzle into the frame. The Loremasters are about to violate the treaties holding the Alliance together, human, by taking control of the mining districts, and they've raised an army to defend those mines from the other kingdoms of Noraam, not from some outside force. They have no authority to do that, but yet that's exactly what they're having you do. Not to protect them from an outside invasion, but to hold them for the *Loremasters* when the crystals dry up everywhere else. You are preparing to break the word of your organization and be revealed as liars and backstabbers, General. That is the *honorable* organization you serve. So, let's go over *exactly* when your soldiers are leaving, exactly what they're going to be doing, where they're going to do it, and we'll go from there."

Kyven made the man talk for nearly an hour, giving Lightfoot time to ransack his office, as he made the man explain just how many men were going to what place, what they were going to do, and then when the rest of the soldiers would arrive and start fortifying the mining villages. He kept the general talking until Lightfoot stood behind the door and waved vigorously, getting his attention. She was ready.

It was time for the last bit of deception.

Carefully, Kyven built an illusion of himself in the exact pose in which he was in, then covered himself with it. Then, with painstaking quiet, he got up and knelt down, getting down lower than his illusion as it peered steadily at the general, then scratched its face absently. He got down on all fours and kept contact with the illusion with only his tail, getting well away from it, then he turned his attention to the bed. The man's wife was still sleeping there, and all it took was a little illusory *bang* in her ear, which only she could hear, to wake her up.

"Bren, dear," she said blearily, "the guards are making too much noise."

The illusion of Kyven stood up quickly, whirling towards the woman, who had sat up in bed and saw the Arcan. She screamed, an ear-splitting,

lusty scream, and Kyven's illusion motioned a hand towards her, as if to execute her with magic. The general moved with a speed deceptive for a man that old, his hand diving into a drawer of the vanity and coming out with a pistol with two barrels, and both loaded with black crystal shots. As lightning swelled around Kyven's hand, the man whirled that pistol at the illusion's back and side and wasted not an instant pulling the trigger. The gunshot echoed through the house, the bullet hitting the far wall and digging into the wood paneling, and the illusion pitched forward bonelessly to the floor. The general jumped to his feet as the woman screamed again, holding the double-barreled pistol on the still form he could see on the floor. Kyven melded with the shadows of the room and separated himself from the illusion, then stalked over to the door on silent hands and feet. The general still held his pistol on the illusion, and when he moved to prod the illusion with his foot, Kyven had the illusion begin to smoke, black tendrils wafting up from the fur of the illusion. The general recoiled, the woman screamed again, and then the illusion on the floor seemed to just dissolve into a fine, shadowy mist. The general gaped as Kyven opened the door and slipped through it, then the hovering mist laughed in Kyven's voice. "You can't kill a spirit, human," the voice taunted, even as the mist evaporated, and the voice faded as if retreating to some far distance. "I will return with the setting sun, and I will track you down and finish you and your family. And spirits are *eternal*...."

On the both sides of the door, all hell broke loose. The general tried to open the door and found it stuck, so he ran to the window and started bellowing into the dark predawn, shouting to arouse the interest of a street patrol. On the other side of the door, Kyven and Lightfoot were racing like mad through the house. They had to be away from the house before it was surrounded by patrols of Loreguard. Lightfoot was carrying a satchel full of papers, the plunder from the house, and Kyven hovered over her and her bounty as they bounded down the stairs and then back to the conservatory, back to the open door. They rushed through it just after Lightfoot locked the door so they wouldn't know exactly where and how they had gained entry, then they bounded across the neatly manicured lawn and jumped the wall, blindly leaping over it and into the street beyond. There could have been an

army of Loreguard there waiting for them, but thank the spirits, the street was empty and deserted...but the sound of boots rushing towards them was audible on both sides of the street. Kyven grabbed hold of Lightfoot and pulled her towards the fence encompassing the manor across the street, and with an urging hand on her backside, sent her over the fence. He clambered up it himself, dropped to the grass beside her, put his arm around her, and covered both of them in an illusion of a small redpetal bush, just as a patrol of Loreguard rushed towards the compound. Lightfoot remained quiet and still as the ten men ran by and then around the corner towards the gate into the compound, then a pair of mounted men galloped up and nearly made their horses fall trying to navigate the corner. When both groups were out of sight, he released the cat, turned, and bolted towards the far side of the yard, where a fence separated the lawn from the alley that bisected the block.

“Nervous,” Lightfoot mused in a whisper as they jumped the fence of the far side, dashed across the alleyway, and then went over the next fence.

“No, now it gets nervous,” he said as he pulled her back into the alley and turned his back to her. “On my back, and for the love of the spirits, do not let go for any reason,” he warned.

She nodded and climbed up onto his back, then wedged the satchel in between them. She took firm grip of him around his chest as her legs wrapped around his waist, and he dropped down onto all fours even as he built an illusion of a Loreguard man and a dappled mare horse that almost exactly resembled the man and horse that had galloped by them. The horse turned as the man atop it urged it aside with the reins, then the man kicked the horse and spurred it a gallop, but under that illusion, Kyven turned his nose towards the river, settled himself to get Lightfoot in a position where he could run, then he bounded off right down the middle of the street once he turned out of the alleyway. The illusory sound of a horse’s shod hooves clapping on the stones of the street echoed up and down as Kyven loped right down the street towards a static checkpoint. The men at the checkpoint moved to intercept the horse, but Kyven shimmied to the side. To those men, it looked as if the rider was reining his horse to go around them, and then the man shouted at the top of his lungs, “General Fourpost’s house was

attacked! Half of you stay, half of you get there *now*! Now, you lazy asses!” the man thundered as the horse barged past the checkpoint and galloped down the street towards Beggar’s Bridge.

“Cute,” Lightfoot intoned, her muzzle near his ear.

“Men often look for guidance in a time of confusion,” Kyven said sagely as another checkpoint came into view ahead.

The lone rider charged through the southern half of New Avannar, screaming the alert at the top of his lungs, charging past checkpoint after checkpoint, patrol after patrol. The men at first thought to stop him, but as they heard him shouting the alarm, they allowed him to pass so he could continue spreading the word, even as a small army of Loreguard converged on the compound of General Bren Fourpost. No checkpoint dared stop the rider as he roused the city, to the point where the checkpoints at both sides of Beggar’s Bridge actually got out of his way and allowed him to pass, and they thought nothing of it as the horse turned after it came off the bridge and rode straight towards the bridge leading to the Loremasters’ headquarters.

They would have stopped to think, however, when the horse turned at Silver Street, which angled into Chain Way. Silver Street wasn’t straight, it was one of the more crooked streets in Old Avannar, where the checkpoints at either side of a block couldn’t see each other at several points between the river and Chain Way. The rider charged down Silver Street, to the surprise of the checkpoint of Silver Street and River Boulevard, but the checkpoint at the intersection of Silver Street and Noble Street never saw the horse and rider.

They saw nothing.

Kyven and Lightfoot ducked into a narrow gap between two old sandstone buildings, and then the lithe cat pulled up an iron grate at the end of that gap. “That smells awful,” Kyven complained.

“It gets worse. In,” she commanded.

And so, as they made their way to New Avannar over the rooftops, they made their way back home through the sewers. The sewers of Old Avannar were actually extremely dangerous, because they were dilapidated, narrow, twisting, and were prone to flooding depending on the tides. They were far too dangerous to use with regularity, but salty thieves like Shario knew the paths of the sewers and knew *when* they were safe to travel, when the tide was low...and Shario had taught Lightfoot well. Despite the city being on the river and not the sea, the high tide did back the river up and raise its level, and when that happened, many of the sewers in Old Avannar flooded. It was a period of lowering tide, so the water in the sewers was nearly knee deep for Lightfoot, and shin deep for Kyven, but the water was flowing steadily as it drained back out into the river. It wasn't the danger of flooding that made the sewers dangerous, it was the Ratrags. Ratrags were monsters about three times the size of a sewer rat, the size of a small dog, who were uniquely adapted to living in the sewers of Avannar...and were in fact found nowhere else in the world. They could breathe both air and water, and lived off garbage and anything unfortunate enough to get washed down into the tunnels. A Ratrag by itself wasn't capable of killing a man unless they took the man by surprise, but the problem was that they moved in packs, and a pack of Ratrags could kill almost anything. The sewers were their domain, and a man gambled with his life any time he entered their territory. The Ratrags were never, ever seen outside of the tunnels, and that was why the city tolerated them. They were hairless and had very sensitive, slimy skin, almost like a slug, they died quickly if their skin dried out, and they were severely allergic to sunlight, to the point where a Ratrag exposed to sunlight died within a matter of minutes. Because they couldn't live long out of the water, and sunlight could kill them, they would not leave the safe confines of their narrow, wet tunnels, even when it rained; they seemed to understand that rain was only temporary, and if the rain stopped while they were out of their tunnels, they might be in trouble if they couldn't get back to the sewers before the water drained away or evaporated, or if the clouds moved on and the sun came out. Like the rats from which they magically evolved, Ratrags were rather clever creatures.

Lightfoot didn't lead them far through the sewers, because they were just too dangerous. It was impossible to travel the rooftops all the way home because they were on the wrong side of Chain Way, and that was as far as the cat took them through the sewers. The sewer tunnels were narrow and crooked, as crooked as the streets above, and they went up, and down, waded through waist-high filthy water, then climbed a ladder to a grate that opened in an alley. "Chain Way," Lightfoot whispered, pointing down the alley. "That way," she added, pointing up the building beside them.

"Not yet," he said. He used the spell he'd learned in Haven that ejected all foreign matter and water from his fur, which left it clean, shiny, and not smelling like an open cesspool. He duplicated the spell for Lightfoot, which left her similarly clean. "You know she'd absolutely *kill* us if we came home smelling like that," he whispered in explanation.

Lightfoot gave him a slightly amused look, then she started up the wooden beam that formed the corner of the building beside them. Kyven replaced the grate and looked up to see her climbing, and when her tail ghosted out from her, it revealed Lightfoot's genitals. "At least I'll love the view as I climb," he mused quietly as he started up after her.

Once they were on the rooftops, both of them felt much safer. The Loreguard weren't up here, and their path was clear. They moved with confident stealth along the rooftops, jumping from roof to roof, making no sound even as Loreguard patrolled the streets right under them. They did, however, slow to a stop and take cover as something Kyven had heard about but had never seen appeared southeast of them and moved in an angle towards them, a flying machine. It was the size of a buggy, with two narrow seats and a pair of long, fluttering wings that beat at the air in a droning sound, like a dragonfly's wings. The flying machines were dreadfully expensive to build and consumed crystals at a tremendous rate, making them both expensive to buy and also to operate, but they offered someone an advantage far over anyone else. Kyven and Lightfoot huddled under the eaves of a window and covered by an illusion of that very window as the flying device fluttered to within a block of them, as magical lights scanned the city below as it moved steadily north.

“I think they’re mad,” Lightfoot whispered as the flying device fluttered out of sight.

“You think?” he asked with a chuckle, letting her go and dismissing the illusion.

It took them about ten more minutes to get home, and they found the attic window open and waiting for them. Lightfoot slipped in first, and Kyven slinked in after her. They padded down the narrow stairs to the second floor, and found Clover in the hallway, her hand reaching for the door as Lightfoot opened it. “Thank the spirits!” she said in relief. “How did it go?”

“Well,” Lightfoot noted, holding up the satchel.

“Very smooth,” Kyven told her. “Let’s go to the vault and go through this stuff.”

Down in the secret room, Kyven started to sort through the papers as he explained what happened. “I got a good amount out of the general that more or less validates the guesses we made,” he surmised. “And I laid a false trail with him that should make the Loremasters look in the wrong direction long enough to give Shario and his friends time they need.”

“What did you do?”

“Pinned my attacks and the Arcan buying to Phion,” he answered. “I claimed the Phioni exchanged releasing thousands of Arcans in exchange for me coming to Avannar and investigating the Loremasters and their clandestine activities, and told him the Phioni were moving to invade the mining villages in the Free Territories because they know that the crystals are almost gone. The general didn’t believe half of it, but there was *just enough* plausibility to my story to force them to investigate it. While they’re busy aggravating the fuck out of the Phioni, the Flaurens should have a nice open field.” He took one paper with the Loremaster seal on it and scanned it. “And these papers will hopefully substantiate what the general told me. But, he had a lot of motivation to tell the truth.”

“What did you threaten to do to him?” Clover asked lightly.

“To him, nothing. I threatened to murder his youngest child if he lied to me, and kill the next oldest for every subsequent lie, until he was the only one left. He took me seriously.”

“He was convincing,” Lightfoot murmured. “I heard him through the door.”

“I *am* a Shaman of guile and deceit, Lightfoot,” Kyven chuckled. “If I couldn’t lie convincingly, my totem would have nothing to do with me.” He frowned. “The general said that the first advance elements of the occupational forces are leaving for the mining villages in two weeks,” he told Clover. “Surveyors and engineers. The soldiers are supposed to arrive a week later, and they’re the ones that’ll be doing most of the work fortifying the villages. So that’s the window, sister. The Masked have to move their routes away from the mining villages within two weeks.”

“Any word on Deep River?”

He shook his head. “The Loremasters are keeping the plans for the army away from the rest of the Loreguard,” he explained. “The general didn’t know their plans, but he heard rumors that were pretty accurate. He knows through rumor that the army is marching into the forests west of the Smoke Mountains, and since the Loremasters are taking every Arcan they own and sending them to Riyan right now, he’s sure that they’ll be moving very soon.”

“They must, if they want to march across the mountains, find a site, and dig in to prepare for winter,” she nodded. “An army on horseback is one thing, but an army this size will march, and so they must give themselves at least two months to get to Deep River, if that is where they intend to bunker down for the winter.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Brother, an army does not go fast,” she told him. “So many men pitching tents every night, packing up every morning, then organizing and

marching, then stops for rest and to eat, that doesn't actually give them much time to move. It's about five hundred minars from Riyan to Deep River if they go in a straight line, but they can't do that. An army of that size needs supplies, and those supplies will be on wagons...and there is no way they could run wagons across the Smoke Mountains from Riyan to Deep River without wasting *months* finding a navigable path through the mountains and clearing a road. They'll march the army north to Two Rivers, then down the Deep River valley to Deep River, which is a trip of nearly eight hundred minars, and use the river to ferry supplies back and forth from Two Rivers to Deep River. Given that the army will only move about twelve to fifteen minars a day, that's about two months."

"Could they load up their troops on boats and sail them from Two Rivers?" Kyven asked.

"They could, and probably will, with *some* of their men, to get them to Deep River fast and have them start securing the town. But that's too many men for the very few boats that sail that river. The bulk of the army will march, brother."

"Well, the letter said they wanted to build their new kingdom in the *Snake* River valley," Kyven mused. "It's a good five hundred more minars from Deep River to where it drains into the Great Snake River."

"Our scouts have seen no road building through the south pass, so unless they intend to carry everything they need on the backs of their soldiers, they have to be planning to use the river to move their goods, and that means Two Rivers and Deep River," Clover noted. "That or up the Snake River from Nurys and Alexton."

"Well, let's find out," Kyven said, handing Clover a sheaf of papers.

They rifled through the general's papers until well after dawn, and the papers weren't much more illuminating, but they did corroborate most of what the general told him and proved the general hadn't been lying. They found the general's very deployment plans in the papers, detailing exactly where his men were to go and what they were to do, in a systematic, logical,

and practical deployment to every mining town between Rokan and Two Rivers, where they would build fortifications around *both the villages and the mines*, then bunker down behind their fortifications and defend the villages and the mines against what the papers said were simply *any and all hostile forces*. Most of the papers were just detailed orders and reports from the various army elements as they communicated their status and progress in their mission, showing that the armies that intended to occupy the mining areas were ready to begin the operation. Everything was planned out from troop locations to supply routes, even schedules of supply trains that would restock the supplies of the Loreguard armies. General Fourpost was efficient and very thorough, going by his plan and his execution of that plan, which was his responsibility.

By the time Patches brought them some breakfast, they had gone through all the papers and were discussing the information...which didn't take long. Everything they had learned was actually nothing new, it was just concrete evidence that their theories and assumptions had been correct. The only new information they had were the detailed plans of deployment, which would not certainly change because they didn't hide the fact that they had ransacked the general's office, and all his papers had been stolen.

It was what Kyven left behind that they discussed more than anything else. They would suspect he was lying, but there was just enough truth salted into those lies to make the Loremasters bite, and Kyven knew it. Every lie he told had a small seed of truth inside it, and while the General wouldn't know where those seeds were, the general's Councilor overseers *would* know where the truth was, and that truth would reinforce the lies and force them to take those lies at face value until they could actively prove they were false. They would hear that the hated Shaman *knew* their secret, that they were moving to take over Noraam because of the impending shortage of crystals, but that wasn't the true secret...but it touched on their deepest secrets in a way that would make them very uncomfortable and wary. They would come down on Phion like an angry mother-in-law if only because there was *just enough* in what the general would report Kyven said for them to take a close look at the city-state some two hundred minars

north of Avannar. Kyven's deception was pretty encompassing, bringing the activities of the seemingly unstoppable Shaman in Avannar and the disappearance of Arcans from the kennels together in a patchwork quilt that, from a distance, did look like it all fit together in a way that made a kind of sense. They would be desperate to learn just what Phion knew, to see which pieces fit and which were just laid over the quilt to make it *look* like they fit, and that would cause them to focus their attention northward for a couple of critical weeks. They would investigate Phion if only to discount Kyven's claims and separate the lies from the truth...and while they were looking north, the Flaurens would make their move in the south. Kyven left more than just that, though. His little trick at the end, making them think that he was somehow unkillable, would also throw them for a loop.

But the main thing Kyven felt needed to be silently conveyed to the Loremasters was *someone knew their secret*, because he wanted them to sweat. When word got back to them that Flaur was withdrawing from the alliance, he wanted them to worry just who was going to leave next, he wanted them to see enemies behind every tree on *this* side of the Smoke Mountains, enemies that they were not yet ready to face. Until they had complete military control of the Smoke Mountain regions of the Free Territories, they needed the fiction of the alliance to hold to keep the kingdoms from attacking the Loremasters. He wanted them to be so embroiled in maintaining the fiction of the alliance and struggling to quell Flaur that they couldn't devote full time and attention to their activities west of the mountains, which would give the Arcans a chance to blindside them and hopefully deal them a swift, startling, and crushing blow that would shatter any attempt they made to establish a foothold in the Snake River or Deep River valleys.

And when word got back to the human kingdoms on this side of the mountains that the Arcans were organized and had their own nation far to the west, he wanted them too worried about each other to focus on the Arcans. If the Loremasters and Flaur were beating each other up on the piedmont plains south of Riyan, if other kingdoms withdrew from the

alliance and declared war on the Loremasters because of their duplicity, that tied up the human war machines on *this* side of the mountains and kept them from banding together and attacking the Arcans to the west. That kind of unbridled chaos was the perfect opportunity for the Shaman to invade the human lands of Noraam and free the Arcans, and take them *home*.

About an hour after breakfast, they ended the conference. Kyven was sleepy from being up most of the night, so he padded upstairs to take a nap. Lightfoot came up with him, and he was a little surprised when she followed him into the room, and quite deliberately reached for the buckle of her belt. “You sure we have the energy for that?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Let’s find out,” she said, letting the belt fall to the floor. Seeing her without that belt instigated an immediate reaction out of him.

It turned out they did. When Lightfoot wanted him, she was almost always ready, so there was very little in the way of foreplay. It a matter of minutes, she was kneeling on the bed with him behind her, her tail shivering as he pushed into her. She was her usual intense self despite both of them being a little sleepy, and as usual the only sound he elicited from her were soft, throaty growls as he kneaded her small breasts with his claws hands and thrust into her with growing urgency. But, since both of them were tired, they didn’t last half as long as they usually did. Lightfoot clenched around him after what seemed only a moment, and he held her tightly against him as she triggered his own climax, spending himself into her. She panted to recover as he licked at the backs of her ears, then nuzzled her neck and cheek from behind. “Was that what you wanted?” he breathed.

“Yes, thanks,” she said breathlessly, keeping hold of his arms as she leaned forward, urging them both down to the bed. “Like this,” she said, then she yawned. “Again when we wake up.”

“Of course, my sleek Lightfoot,” he breathed in her ear as he settled in on his side, keeping her back pressed against his chest and stomach. “What man could say no to you?”

“Bleeding ones,” she answered, which made him explode into laughter, his breath disturbing her wild shock of bone-white hair.

They only slept a couple of hours, then enjoyed each other again before getting up, getting up to take stock in the reactions of the Loremasters to their attacks. Kyven stayed close to the shop during the day, reading the reports sent by the Masked cell in town, as well as a few letters sent over by postboy by Shario. The Masked cell had a few moles in the Loremaster organization, and the information they gleaned was shared with Kyven’s group. Shario’s information, however, was much more interesting. The Flaurens had already begun purging themselves of the Loremasters by doing it *quietly*, primarily by arresting or detaining the Loremasters stationed at the most remote Flauren villages. By the time those Loremasters reached the main cities, the Flaurens would expel all Loremasters. Their plans for the Loreguard were simple; they intended to march their armies and sail their navies and evict the Loreguard, by force if necessary. Kyven and Clover digested this information and discussed it until well into the afternoon. When it was clear Kyven would have no customers that day, he closed the shop and went out to the taverns and festhalls frequented by off-duty Loreguard and Loremasters. Out there, he bought a few rounds of drinks, settled in, and *listened*. And they didn’t disappoint him. Just by sitting there and listening to half-drunk Loremasters and Loreguard, Kyven learned that the Loremasters were, to use a phrase, in a tizzy. Lightfoot’s killing of the Councilor had put the upper echelons of the organization into an absolute uproar, because the evidence made it abundantly clear that he’d been murdered by a clawed Arcan. The body had been savaged, his ten guards murdered by someone that had overpowered them physically and ripped them up with claws or broken bones or necks through sheer physical power, which were blatant indications that an Arcan had been the attacker. But what was most mysterious at all, all alchemical attempts to divine the identity of the attacker had been defeated.

Clearly, Clover’s owl spirit had a hand in that, covering Lightfoot’s tracks from a magical standpoint to prevent the Loremasters from using

alchemy to gather clues. The bargain, Kyven knew, was for the owl to protect them from discovery. Most of the defenses the owl had placed were around the shop itself, but each of them had a *touch*, a mark of favor, then extended to them the same protection when they were outside. The owl's protection wouldn't stop someone from *seeing* Lightfoot, but it seemed that protection did protect his fighting Arcan from being discovered using magic. The protection on Kyven and Clover was much weaker than it was on the others, because he and she were Shaman, and were able to protect themselves.

The murder of the Councilor had put the elite in a state of what could be called panic. For the first time, they saw that *they* were just as much a target as the Loreguard grunt standing guard on a street corner, and that sense of personal involvement had caused them all to run to the safety of the Loremaster headquarters and triple the already heavy guard. The murder of the Loremaster and the general at the bridge only solidified it, made it abundantly clear that the rulers of the Loremasters had been targeted...and what was interesting to Kyven was that they believed that it was a *group* doing it, not just a couple of people. The rumors flying around was that some kingdom or government was attacking the Loremasters, and had somehow gained the cooperation of a Shaman, and now that group was attacking the Loremasters.

That just played right into the story he told the general. The Eusicans were highly prominent in the rumors, because they didn't believe in the Trinity, and in many Eusican nations and kingdoms, it was illegal to keep Arcans as slaves...what few Arcans there were outside of Noraam. Until just fifty years ago, no kingdom in Eusica would permit an Arcan within their borders. Most nations in western Eusica followed a religion called the Followers of the Star, but it wasn't literally worshipping the night sky. That was just a metaphor, because their god's title was translated into *the guiding star* in Noraavi. Their religion forbade slavery, though it didn't recognize Arcans as sentient beings. Their reasoning was that Arcans were animals, very intelligent animals without souls, but their religion also said it was immoral to treat either man or animal as chattel, to use them or abuse them,

and no man could force another to do a day's labor without giving a day's pay, and their High Prelate had decreed that since Arcans could perform tasks that only a human could perform, they therefore had to be compensated for performing a human's work just like a human. Their religious leader decided this because even though their religion classified Arcans as animals because Arcans had human-like intelligence far beyond any other animal, Arcans could comprehend their situation in ways no other animal could. That human-like comprehension gave Arcans a unique status in the Eusican religion, more than an animal but less than a man, and it fit in with the religion's strict teachings about being compassionate and kind to lesser creatures and animals. Even animals raised to be slaughtered and eaten had to be treated kindly and well, and that slaughter had to be painless and humane. They believed that an animal who died in pain caused the meat from that animal to become tainted with sin, and they would not touch it. What they did was put the animal in a special barn filled with a gas that caused the animals to go to sleep, and then die peacefully in that sleep. When a couple of Eusican nations changed their laws to allow Arcans to enter, to entice Noraavi merchants to set up shop, the Noraavi were shocked to find out that the Eusicans would allow them to bring their Arcans, and own those Arcans, but those Arcans were not permitted to perform slave labor. If the merchants wanted to employ Arcans, they had to *pay* them for that work. Even owned Arcans could not be forced to do labor without compensation, as per the tenets of the Eusican religion. That so shocked the Noraavi that they still to this day refused to open trade enclaves in any kingdom in Eusica.

But, the Loremasters were right, up to a point. There was a group attacking the Loremasters...just no group they would ever believe existed.

The full measure of the rumor was thus: they believed that there was a large group of agents from a Eusican country was in Avannar attacking the Loremasters to try to destabilize Noraam, which was the first step to Eusica taking over the kingdoms to gain access to the crystals, a resource that only existed in any real quantity on Noraam. They believed that these Eusicans had somehow managed to find and enlist a Shaman, who was working with

them because the Shaman foolishly believed that the Eusicans would treat the Arcans in a way immoral to the Trinity, which taught that Arcans were animals created for the sole reason to serve man in any capacity man so desired.

It showed Kyven both the good and the bad of the effectiveness of the Shaman and the Arcans in hiding their true nature. The Loremasters absolutely could not believe that Arcans were intelligent and sophisticated enough to perpetrate such an action, or at least lower-ranking Arcans. More powerful Loremasters knew that the Shaman were in fact highly intelligent and very dangerous, but even they couldn't comprehend something like Haven, where Arcans lived and governed themselves peacefully. But when the average human *did* discover that Arcans were just as smart as humans, able to create their own society and function, the backlash would be severe. Humans feared what they didn't understand, and that fear most often turned to violence.

It also showed that, at the moment, the lower-ranking Loremasters couldn't believe that people in the Noraavi Alliance would ever back out of it. Never one mention of Flaur in their rumors, nor of Phion, which told him that Kyven's baiting of the general had yet to leak out of the upper echelons of their organization.

Kyven returned to the shop well before sunset, only to find Clover packing a small pack in the vault. "What are you up to?" he asked curiously.

"I have been summoned by the spirits," she told him.

"Summoned? What for?"

"I am to meet a large element of Masked near Hamon, and attack the Briton frigate carrying the rifles before it can reach Stinger Bay. The council and the spirits do not want those weapons to enter the field."

Kyven gasped. "How?"

"Some of the Masked are experienced sailors, and they have acquired a raker. That should be fast enough to catch the frigate while still too far from

land for the Loreguard or the Stinger Bay ships to respond. The Britons have no exposure to Shaman, my brother. Our orders are to capture the ship if possible and take the rifles and then sink it, or sink the ship and deny the rifles to the Loreguard if that's not possible. Capturing the ship will be dangerous, but if we can get those rifles for *our* people, then the risk is worth the result. Either way, keeping them out of the hands of the Loreguard is what matters most."

"I...sister, I'll feel, helpless without you here."

She gave him a light smile. "I am not your mother, my brother," she teased lightly. "I have every confidence you'll still be here when I get back. You are clever and resourceful, and I'm sure that while I'm gone, you'll be much more careful than usual."

"Damn right I will," he said, coming up and nuzzling her, then pulling her into an embrace. "But I'm more worried about you, sister. Britons are supposed to be the finest sailors on the sea. Any attack on their ship won't be without risk."

"Cannons and rifles are no match for magic, my brother," she told him. "They won't fire on us until I'm close enough for their weapons to mean nothing. That, the Masked absolutely swear will happen, something about maritime law and custom dealing with ship to ship parley which we will admittedly be breaking. But this is war now, brother, and there are no rules in war but one. Win."

The idea of Clover not being with him was...it was terrifying. He didn't realize until that moment how much he depended on his sister, on her calm wisdom and her analytical mind, and on the reassuring comfort of her presence. Though Kyven was technically the leader of their cell, Clover was the true ruler, because he acceded to her greater wisdom and she had a great say in every decision made. She was his role model, everything a Shaman should be, wise and gentle and powerful, and he would feel both exposed and uncertain with her not there.

But he would make it. He would be much more careful without Clover being there, both because she was so important and also because without Clover it meant that the young ones would be defenseless when he wasn't home. Yes, until she came back, he would stay very, *very* close to the shop.

He had no idea how it happened, or which of them started it, but one moment he was holding her, and the next she was bent over the table, her leather trousers around her feet, and Kyven was penetrating her while his clawed hands pushed under her shirt and grabbed her breasts. He pushed fully into her and grabbed tight hold of her. "Tell me you'll be careful," he whispered. "Tell me you'll come home safely."

"With you saying goodbye like this, how could I not?" she asked with a light chuckle that was drowned out by a low, deep-throated growl of pleasure as she leaned on her hands and allowed Kyven to have his way with her...and he didn't disappoint. He was both urgent and mindful that he was giving her her last episode with him until she came home, so he made sure that it was her pleasure that mattered most in their sexual interlude. He could feel her trembling against him as he did everything he knew she liked, from gripping her shoulders to biting at her ears lightly to making love to her with powerful yet measured strokes that shook the table but didn't bounce her around. He worked her up to a powerful climax that made her dig furrows in the table with her short claws as she clenched around him in a way that almost felt like she was joining to him, and he gripped her tightly as that incited his own climax. He panted into her hair as she growled and groaned in equal measure, then collapsed to her elbows on the table. "By the spirits, my brother, that was one hell of a way to send me off," she panted disjointedly. "You're tempting me to take you upstairs and do that again."

"I would if I could keep you here, but the spirits have called you," he said regrettably. "You are needed, sister, by someone who needs you more than I do. You and me are the only Shaman east of the Smoke Mountains, and I can't leave Avannar. You're the only one that can do it."

“I know. But I promise you, my brother, I’ll be careful. And I’ll be home soon. A week at the most is how long I’ll be gone. The Masked knows exactly when that ship is supposed to arrive and which direction it’s coming from. I’ll be literally going through Hamon and straight to the ship, then we set sail. We’ll intercept it and sink it, then I’ll be right back here.”

“And I’ll be waiting for you.”

“You’ve definitely determined what we’re doing first when I get back,” she said impishly, looking back at him as she wiggled her bottom slightly. The shifting was actually a little painful for him, and he winced slightly and grabbed tighter hold of her.

“Stop that, or you won’t get it when you get back.”

She laughed lightly. “Just be careful, my brother. Without me here to rein in your wilder notions, I’ll worry about you.”

“I may not leave the shop until you get back,” he grunted, which made her laugh for some odd reason.

Chapter 4

He never expected to feel like this.

It was a funny thing that sometimes you didn't understand exactly how one felt about someone else until that other person was no longer there. Clover had left two days ago, and ever since she slipped out of the house in the dead of night and headed for Hamon, which was across the inlet of the Great Blue Bay from Stinger Bay at the very tip of the peninsula that formed the northern edge of the bay, Kyven had felt...*unsettled*. Clover was an integral part of his life, and without her there, he was feeling the normal smooth action of the cogs and gears of his life grinding to a halt. She was his casual lover in the way of Arcans, giving her the comfort and physical pleasure she enjoyed. She was also his mentor and his role model. She was a real Shaman, a true Shaman, a woman settled into her role and who was confident and capable. Kyven had Shaman training, but he knew that he hadn't learned nearly as much as other Shaman knew. He was nowhere near as wise as Clover, or any other Shaman. The fox spirit had rushed his training because of the seriousness of the situation, and in that respect, he could not fault her. Things were coming to a head, and the fox *needed* him, and needed him *right now*. She didn't have time to train him as thoroughly as she probably would have any other time. Lacking the training, he had looked up to Clover as what he should be, the model of a true Shaman, and he tried to emulate her whenever possible. He knew he would never quite match her maternal nature, because that was her more than being a Shaman, but in other ways, he tried to be as much like Clover as possible.

She had certainly not discouraged him from that. Their talks at night were long and involved, and in a way, she had taken over from the fox to teach him those things the fox either could not or would not. But instead of teaching him magic or harsh lessons, her teaching was about the *essence* of

being a Shaman. It was from her that he had learned about *being* a Shaman, learned as much if not more than he had from the fox.

The loss of Clover certainly impacted their operations. She did a great deal of communicating with the faceless cell of the Masked in Avannar, trading information with them and knowing how to organize it and sift through it to seek out the truth. Kyven was certainly capable of that himself, but her help gave him more time to focus on his masquerade of being a respectable member of Avannar society, a prominent crystalcutter. Clover helped him perpetrate that deception by giving him free time to pursue it.

But most of all...he just *missed* her. She was his mentor, his teacher, his partner, and his friend. He felt strangely exposed without Clover there, the quiet, gentle, charming presence that guided them all. He missed her so much it shocked him, and the entire first day she was gone, he staggered through the day in a kind of haze that made it hard for him to concentrate.

But, strangely enough...it wasn't love. He had laid in bed this morning, woken up by Lightfoot when she came in and decided to sleep in his bed, and analyzed everything he felt about Clover. He was worried at first that it *was* love making him feel the way he did, that he had somehow fallen for his mentor...but it wasn't. He loved Clover, oh yes, but not in a romantic fashion. He loved her as a friend, his deepest and most intimate friend, the one who knew more about him than he knew about himself, the one woman whom he could trust and be honest. Clover really did feel like a sister to him, though in a rather odd and disturbing twist of Arcan culture, a near-sister who shared his bed when she wanted some physical attention. She was a dear, dear friend, and he loved her deeply, but something deep inside him did not see her as a *wife*. He could love her, admitted that he was sexually attracted enough to enjoy sleeping with her, but she was not for him. Not like that. It was proof to him that the fur on him was only skin deep. Despite his acceptance of Arcan customs and Arcan ways, inside, he was still human, and always would be. Though he had learned well from the lesson of Clet and Stripes that love could transcend the boundary between human and Arcan, the human in him sought out its own.

Danna.

Even now, despite the minars that separated them and the anger and bad blood that existed between them, when he thought of a woman in that fashion, in the terms of *love* and *marriage*, the first and only woman that came to mind was Danna. Like a rheumy joint, she was a pain that just wouldn't go away, one to which he'd grown so accustomed that he didn't even think about it anymore.

Ironic, that. The one woman he wanted wanted nothing to do with him, yet the woman who was pregnant with his children, Umbra, barely crossed his mind during the course of a day.

Umbra. Last he'd heard of her, she was comfortably pregnant and living with Firetail, because she was too naïve and uneducated in Arcan ways to be left by herself. Her lack of experience with advanced technology might get her killed. So Firetail had taken her in and looked after her like she was Firetail's daughter, and the report he'd gotten from Haven about it a couple of weeks ago intimated that all was well with her.

Clover. He hoped she was alright. He hoped her mission was swift and without danger, and she came home well and whole next week.

But, he had to go on. He couldn't hide in his shop until she came back. He had the Loremasters on the defensive, running around like maniacs. The murder of a Councilor in his own home who was savaged by a clawed Arcan when they knew that the fox Arcan sported nasty claws, the attack on the general, and the sniper killings of a high-ranking Loremaster and a Loreguard general had had their desired effect. The Loremasters were now terrified, because the mysterious Shaman that had made them look like fools now seemed to have help in the form of a highly trained gunman, and also because they now understood that this was no longer some abstract plan put down on paper and commanded over a map from the safety of their offices and dens. Now, this was *immediate*, and they were right in the middle of it...and they were *targets*. They had planned a war, the systematic takeover of the Free Territories and the forging of their own nation west of

the Smoke Mountains, and they were disconcerted and paralyzed when that war leaped off dusty papers filled with procedures and statistics and *started killing them*. Now they were engaged. Now they were involved, intimately involved, and their Loremasters tabards and their reputations and the security of Avannar and their Loreguard protectors did not isolate them from the war they were planning. The war had come early, and instead of them moving with stealth and acting out of surprise then settling in behind heavy fortifications to bleed the kingdoms of Noraam until their crystals went dry, the tables had been turned and now they were the ones reeling from a foe that had struck a swift and decisive first blow.

The one thing he'd been doing was keeping up with his intelligence. His Masked compatriots, Shario, and his own foray out into the taverns last night had painted a picture of a group on the defensive. All the Loremasters of any kind of rank were now domiciled inside the Loremaster headquarters, sleeping in offices and wherever they could set up a bed or pallet. Food was being shipped in by the wagonload, and the guards stationed at the bridge, the only way onto the island, were sixty strong. They were afraid now, afraid that the mysterious black fox Shaman, who moved through the city like a ghost, would attack *them* next. The Circle had pulled in everyone that mattered to them to their headquarters to protect them as they continued to try to find and eliminate the Shaman and whoever he hired to kill those people at the bridge. They did *not* think that a Shaman would use a gun, not when a Shaman could use magic. They believed that the Shaman had enlisted the help of a sharpshooter to attack the bridge while he did something else, something which they didn't know about.

They knew about the rifle now. The shape of a Briton rifle bullet was nothing like a musket ball, for it was conical and aerodynamic. They knew that whoever killed the Loremaster and the General had a weapon rarely seen in Noraam, a Eusican rifle, and now they were searching for the attacker by trying to track down that gun. They were rare enough that it was easy to track the few that existed in Avannar, and the owners of weapons like that had already received very direct visits from Loreguard detachments.

Shario, that clever rascal, had covered his tracks well. He was not part of that sweep.

He was part of another sweep yesterday, though. He was a respectable businessman *now*, but the Loreguard knew, or suspected, that the money he'd used to start those legitimate businesses had come by less than legal means, and now the Loreguard were coming down on the criminal underside of the city. They were smart enough to understand that even the black fox Shaman had to have help to do some of the things he was doing, a cell of the Masked buried in the city that was providing him with assistance--or was commanding him, since many felt that Arcans weren't smart enough to run a sophisticated operation, but that cell would need supplies, equipment, and information that could only be acquired through the black market and the criminal underworld. That was a fairly logical conclusion, and also a correct one. So, they were trying to unearth the Masked cell by trying to drag information about them out of the fences, thieves, and black marketeers through which they would be dealing to get their supplies.

But they would come up empty. The only one they dealt with was Shario, and Shario was far too clever to be caught by the likes of them.

Kyven sighed and stirred, and Lightfoot shifted in her sleep and grabbed hold of his shoulder. He was on his stomach with her up against his side, her arm draped over his back to grip his opposite shoulder, but while she slept he laid there and pondered. He shifted to try to get out from under her arm without disturbing her, but she gripped him with her claws, just enough to send a slight shiver of pain through his skin.

"Lightfoot," he called reluctantly. "Let me up."

"No," she answered in a crystal-clear voice.

"It's past sunrise, I have to open the shop."

He felt her claws flex slightly, then they withdrew and she removed her hand from his shoulder. "Thanks," he said as she slid out of bed, rolling to

his feet as she settled back into the bed. He leaned over and licked her fondly on the cheek, then wrapped himself in an illusion of himself in a robe as he padded downstairs and into the shop. The others were already awake, Tweak sitting at a bench explaining cutting to Watcher and Lucky as Patches busied herself in the kitchen, the smell of bacon wafting in as pans sizzled within. “Good morning!” Lucky called happily.

“Mornin’ boys, mornin’ Tweak,” he said. “Keep the door closed, I’m opening the shop.”

“Breakfast is almost ready!” Patches called from the kitchen.

When he stepped through the door and looked through the glass of the window, he saw Yoris and a few Loreguard outside. As he opened the eave of the counter, he dislodged himself from the illusion enough to enact the power of the amulet and take on a human form. His experience with Shario had proved to him that he had to be very careful around enemies, and if Shario could puzzle out his Arcan nature through subtle clues, so could someone like Danna...and the Loreguard certainly had others as smart as Danna working for them. He felt his muscles and bones turn to cold water as he was poured into a new mold, and then he felt a little cooler when the feeling faded and left him naked and human under the illusion. He still did not wear clothes for fear that they would interfere with his shadow powers. Once he was settled, his illusion paused to give a big, languid yawn and stretch, as underneath it he kicked his heel against the door several times, a signal to those in the shop to evacuate immediately, then he advanced onto the door and opened it, then stepped outside. “What are you doing here so early, Yoris?” he asked, feigning sleepiness.

“Odd for you to open so late, Artisan,” one of the guards said coolly.

“Eh, I’ve had no business for weeks anyway, so I figured what the hell, why not sleep in,” he said dismissively, then he yawned. “It’s not like I’m missing anything.”

“Well, I’m about to give you some, Kyven,” Yoris told him, and the tone of his voice wasn’t...normal. Kyven’s instincts woke up at that point.

There was something, something wrong here. Either they were spooked by the murders of the Loremasters or it was directed at Kyven himself. That, and these men, they didn't *feel* like normal Loreguard. He didn't know why he felt that way, but he did, and he knew better than to ignore those kinds of feelings and instincts.

Kyven realized that he had to be very, very careful here. He wouldn't dare open his eyes to the spirits without an illusion covering him, but he didn't need to do so to heavily suspect that one of these men had a truth crystal hidden somewhere on his person. From here, he had to be very careful to speak only the truth...from *his point of view*. So he had to choose his words carefully.

"Well, come on in and I'll take a look," he invited. "I can have my cook make you some breakfast if you want." And if Tweak was doing what he was supposed to do, he had the boys hustled out of the shop.

"This time we have to go to the building, my friend," Yoris told him. "What we need you to appraise isn't something they would let me bring out."

"Okay, now you've got me curious, my friend, given what you've brought to me," he said. "Let me go get some clothes on. Come on in, no need standing around here when you can sit down and wait for me."

"Certainly," Yoris said with a smile.

Patches was standing by the kitchen door in the shop, and thankfully, everyone else was gone and the shop left in the same condition it always appeared when Yoris visited when he came in. The other benches were covered, with only Kyven's own bench looking to be used. "Still no apprentices?"

"I was just about ready to bring some before all this crazy stuff started happening," Kyven said frankly. "Timble's begging me to take a few of them. Master Holm was too stern to let us get away with anything, but Timble's not quite so harsh. Yet, anyway," he chuckled. "I think you can

make some coffee for the gentlemen while I get dressed,” he said to Patches.

“Coffee,” she nodded, scurrying back into the kitchen.

Yoris looked around. “Where is that handsome coyote?”

He saw that this could get ugly quick, because that was a question that he could not answer without either lying or saying something that they could check by going back through the logs of the checkpoints around his shop. “Out running an errand, I think,” he answered carefully, which was technically true. “She should be back soon.” Also technically true, compared to the complexity of her task. If she was back in a week, given what she had to do, that was definitely *soon*.

“You think? You don’t know what your own Arcans are up to?” one of the guards asked pointedly.

“My coyote is a very clever Arcan, so I give her latitude I don’t give the others,” he answered simply, which again was technically true. He’d never trust the others with the kinds of things Clover did. “If she’s out, then she certainly has a good reason to be out, and she’ll be back home as soon as she’s finished. I have no doubt what she’s doing is important and needs to be done, especially how dangerous it is out on the streets right now for an unescorted Arcan.”

“That’s a little strange, Artisan.”

“Before all this insanity happened, I saw Arcans on the street unescorted all the time,” Kyven said flatly, giving the man a direct look. “My Arcan went out by herself before. What makes it so suspicious that I let her do the same thing now? The only thing that’s changed is that there’s suddenly a Loreguard checkpoint on every corner. Her ability to do her chores without my supervision certainly didn’t change. The only thing that changed is your stupid checkpoints making it hard for her to do those chores without being hassled. Now let me get dressed. Be right back.”

Upstairs, Kyven found Tweak and the boys hiding in their room. He opened the door and looked in, then nodded. "Go to the attic and hide, and don't come out until Patches says it's safe," he ordered. Tweak nodded soberly and herded the two young boys across the hall and through the narrow door at the end of the hall that led to the attic, closing the door behind him, then he went into his room. Lightfoot was already gone, most likely up on the roof so she could keep watch, so he sat on the bed and considered options. If he was going into the headquarters of the Loremasters, he couldn't take any chances...and that meant clothes. He wasn't going in there as anything but a crystalcutter, but he was absolutely sure he'd be searched and inspected, and he didn't want to have to worry about holding an illusion on top of everything else. While in his human form, the fox said he was absolutely undetectable, human in every way, and even the foxhead medallion would vanish and be absolutely undetectable itself...which was true. It wasn't around his neck, and he honestly had no idea where it was. So, if they were taking him into the lion's den, he wanted to be as normal as possible.

So, he pulled his human clothes out of the wardrobe, an outfit which he used as a basis for his illusions quite often. A soft blue cotton shirt with laces on the neckline went over his head, and soft underclothes went under a pair of rugged denim pants. He pulled on a pair of soft moccasin boots, then grabbed a light vest from the wardrobe and padded back downstairs, feeling a little odd to be wearing clothes as he pulled the vest on.

In the shop, things were quiet and a little tense. Patches was serving coffee to the Loreguard, who were giving her hard looks even as their eyes surveyed the shop's interior coolly. These were not normal guards. These were...different. They were almost unusually interested in his shop, and their eyes took in everything.

"Where are your other Arcans?" Yoris asked. "The ferret and that little cat of yours?"

"Doing something I don't think you're old enough to hear about, Yoris," he answered directly, which made Yoris laugh. He took a sandwich

of bacon and eggs, his breakfast, from Patches with a nod, and she rushed back into the kitchen.

“You *let* them rut like animals?” another guard asked.

“Why not?” he shrugged. “They’re going to do it anyway. I keep them all in the same room. This way, they think I’m kindly for letting them do something they’d do no matter what.”

“Why does a lone shopkeeper have so many Arcans?”

“I fell into it, as it were,” he answered simply. “I needed help running the shop but didn’t want to bring any apprentices until I was set up, so I got some Arcans to do the chores apprentices would usually do. I only wanted two, but I was convinced to take four. I gave in, and I’m glad I did. The two extra mouths to feed isn’t cheap, but there’s a lot to do around here and they pull their weight. It makes it worth it to keep them around.” And all of it was perfectly true. He’d only wanted two to come with him to start out with, but he ended up with four. He just left out what they were brought to do. Again, perfectly true...from a certain point of view.

“I’m sure you have papers for them?” one of the guards pressed.

“Papers?” Kyven asked, then he laughed. “My collar is on them. Why do I need papers?”

“They don’t bother with papers in Atan, Grel,” Yoris said simply. “It’s a small village where everyone knows everyone. Kyven’s collar is all the proof of ownership he needs.”

Kyven could tell they were obviously digging, but he couldn’t really do anything about it. To push to leave would make it look like he was uncomfortable, and his past experiences with anyone but Yoris had been less than cordial, so he remained tight-lipped and terse with the guards while remaining friendly and amiable to Yoris. So, he simply ate his sandwich as the Loreguard and Yoris sipped at their coffees without much enthusiasm. After a few minutes, after Kyven finished his sandwich, Yoris stood up. “I think we should get going,” he prompted.

Kyven was escorted out of the shop in a way that almost made him feel like these men were encircling him. Yoris and the one named Grel were in front of him as the other five came up behind, and they gathered in a loose semicircle around him that would make it impossible for him to bolt as he closed and locked the door. There were horses and an open buggy carriage waiting on the street, attended by a young boy who was the driver of the wagon and an eighth soldier who was tending the horses. Kyven was invited into the buggy ahead of Yoris, and the two of them settled in as the Loreguard mounted. They then started down the street with four guards in front and four behind.

“Odd that you’d bring so many guards if you’re not carrying anything, Yoris,” he noted.

“Ghastly business,” he answered grimly. “They didn’t want me to come out at all, but they know that you don’t...deal well with anyone but me.”

“I take it this has to do with that rumor that’s been flying around about the shooting at the bridge?” he asked. “I heard it was some crazy man with a pair of pistols that did it, and he jumped in the river before they could catch him.” Which was indeed one of the rumors flying around.

“The honest truth, my friend, is they have no idea who did it,” he answered with a conspiratorial look. “But yes, this is part of the precautions they’re having us take now. That’s also why they want you to come to the building rather than me come to you. They figure that an Artisan is less at risk than a Loremaster on the streets right now.”

“Lovely,” Kyven said darkly. “So they want *me* to take the risk. Remind me again why I work for you, Yoris.”

He chuckled. “Because I pay you twice list.”

“That’s a good reason,” Kyven noted, which made Yoris laugh.

After moving through several checkpoints, they reached the bridge. Kyven was right that he was thoroughly searched, and then they passed a

probe over him searching for any magical or alchemical auras, something he'd have been hard pressed to defeat using an illusion. He was almost thankfully relieved that he had made the right decision in putting on clothes.

What he wasn't prepared for, however, was when one of the guards grabbed his arm and pulled it out, and then a knife blade was dragged over his forearm. "Ow! Hey, what the hell?" Kyven demanded as a line of blood appeared on his forearm. A guard touched a crystal-tipped delicate wand-like device to the blood, and the crystal tip turned red.

"He's clean," the guard announced, letting go of him. Kyven yanked his arm back and put his hand over the shallow cut.

"Clean? What the hell did you cut me for?" he asked hotly.

"To make sure you're human, my friend," Yoris said seriously, holding his arm out for the man. Kyven saw that even Yoris was cut and checked. "The Shaman that has invaded the headquarters can somehow hide behind a magical mask that makes him appear to be human. So they make *sure* that everyone that goes to the island is what they appear to be."

"Oh. Well, warn a man next time. That hurt!" he complained, filing away this bit of information away as yet another obstacle to overcome the next time he came here to plunder.

After they got back in the buggy, they were driven to the building, to a side entrance near the Loreguard barracks. To Kyven's surprise, they were all cut and checked again by guards at the entrance, and once cleared, Kyven followed Yoris not upstairs, but downstairs. The Loremasters' office of crystal management was in the basement, near the vaults they had where they kept their crystals and devices. So, the move downstairs didn't surprise Kyven at all. They walked along a low-ceilinged yet comfortably wide passageway that was obviously underground, until they entered a wide, spacious room where bench after bench was laid out at equal distances, and each one was manned by a crystalcutter, plying his trade. There had to be sixty cutters down here, and the *tink tink* of hammers and chisels filled the air almost like chiming music.

Kyven looked out over the cutters with sober eyes. This was, by far, abundant proof that the Loremasters were about to undertake something major, if they needed so many crystals cut.

“What is it, Kyven?” Yoris asked as Kyven stopped and stared.

“Yoris...what’s going on?” he asked in a low whisper. “This...this isn’t normal.”

“I honestly don’t know,” he said soberly. “I just know what I was told to do, and so I’m doing it. Follow me, my friend.”

Kyven was brought to a bench, but a bench in a small room off that main room, a tiny room with a door on opposite walls, a well-appointed bench, and a strong light over it. The room seemed like it would be stuffy and uncomfortable, but the air was fresh and seemed to be circulating, and a look up showed the small holes in the ceiling through which that air was flowing. A young woman came through the other door carrying something in her hands. “Sit, my friend,” Yoris said, and he did so as the rather handsome young lady brought a tray out and set it on the bench. On the tray was a sixteen point black crystal...and Kyven was acutely aware of the eight Loreguard that had come from the shop file into the small room behind him. “This is what we need you to cut, my friend. What can you do with it?”

Kyven put everything else out of his mind as he picked up the crystal, felt it tingle under his fingers. He rifled around on the desk until he came up with a jeweler’s glass, a necessary tool for a black crystal, then put it to his eye and held the crystal under the light. It had an erratic internal structure of shifting alignments that weren’t quite internal flaws or planar faults, but would hamper the flow of energy in the crystal if not cut very carefully to take those into account. This kind of crystal was the kind that tested a cutter, since what Kyven could see was not something the average cutter would look at, or much consider. He would cut the crystal in a pattern based on the three flaws near the center of the crystal and the two planar faults running along its left internal plane, ignoring those shifting alignments

underneath, which would be a very bad cut for the crystal. “This one’s a tricky little bugger,” he noted aloud. “But I can cut it at weight.”

“What our own cutters suggested, but given the value of the crystal, we decided your special skills were needed,” Yoris said with a smile.

“Glad to have a paying contract,” Kyven chuckled. “I assume you want me to cut it now?”

“Please. Given the current situation, they don’t want the crystal taken from the building.”

“Fear the Shaman might attack the holder and take it?” he asked with a wry chuckle.

“The very thing,” Yoris nodded soberly.

“We’ve heard you have more than a passing connection to the Shaman running loose in Avannar, Steelhammer,” one of the Loreguard said as Kyven turned back to the bench.

“Yeah,” he said honestly. “They said a rare black fox Arcan escaped from the Blue Ring of Avannar, and it used my name. I think I know why.”

“And why is that?” another pressed.

So this was what they were after. Kyven settled himself on the bench, surveying the tools, then he started picking them up and testing them. They weren’t his tools, and a cutter had to know his tools if he wanted to be a good cutter. The pause gave him time to organize his thoughts so he could evade the truth crystal while giving them enough to dissuade them. “Well, as I’m sure you know, after I bought out my contract, I left the shop. I told them I was prospecting, but the reality was I’d just had something of a traumatic experience in my life and I needed a little time to sort it out.”

“What kind of trauma?”

“A friend of mine was killed by an Arcan infected with the Touch,” he said, which was an honest interpretation of the events. He *had* been

unsettled by that attack when he left. It wasn't the primary reason he left, but it *was* there, and thus it was technically true. "I didn't see it happen, but I was there to find him. It was ghastly," he said with an honest shudder. "I'd never seen anything like that before in my life. Anyway, I geared myself up for some prospecting, not really knowing what I needed, I had to get advice, then I struck out on my own...for all of a few days. Not two days after I left Atan, I had no horses, I had no gear, and I had no supplies. Guess I just wasn't cut out for life in the wild," he chuckled. "Anyway, while I was out there, I met an Arcan."

"The black fox?"

He shook his head as he weighed a hammer in his fingers. "It was a wolf, actually. A really big black wolf. It wasn't very nice, or very friendly, and I don't think it liked me very much. It was clearly wild, but it was smart. And it helped me."

"Helped you?"

He nodded. "Brought me food, even taught me a little bit about living in the wild. I wasn't about to put my nose up for it, either. I still think it's odd that it helped me when it didn't like me very much."

"And that's it? It helped you then wandered off?"

"It taught me how to hunt and how to live in the woods," he said calmly. "It stayed with me for a while, and sometimes, when it wasn't being particularly irritating, sometimes we'd talk a while. Now that I know what I know, I think it could be said that the fox sent that wolf to me to help me so it could learn about me, and *use* me. I mean, not long after that, a black fox Arcan using my name escapes from the blue ring, and I thought *nothing* could escape from the blue ring. I guess a Shaman can," he shrugged. "And now there's a black fox Arcan running loose in Avannar. At the time, I didn't say much about the wolf helping me, because it was literally keeping me alive. After that fox showed up here, I guess I was too worried about you Loremasters blaming me for the fox when I had no idea at the time that I was helping it indirectly, so I kept my mouth shut. Now that I have so

many Loreguard standing audience over me cutting a crystal, I think now you want to know what I know, so I'm telling you what I know. I guess I should have thought more about what kind of price tag was hanging off that help, because I'm sure as hell paying for it now."

And all of it completely true. From a certain point of view.

"A pretty outlandish story," one of the Loreguard said in a strong voice. But he knew they were looking at each other without even looking, he knew they were looking at the one with the hidden truth crystal, who was no doubt nodding that he had spoken not a single lie.

"I know, which is why I've kept it to myself," he answered evenly. "If people found out I had a connection to the black fox Arcan, even an unknowing one, it would cost me business and friends, and may even get me run out of Avannar by my neighbors. Don't you think I was only smart for keeping my mouth shut?"

"You should have come forward!" one of them protested.

"And lose my shop and have to go back to Atan in disgrace, or maybe even end up in the Black Keep?" Kyven drawled as he picked up the crystal and set it in the holder. "What would *you* have done in my position?"

"Well, you're being pretty chatty now," one of the said.

"Because I'm not stupid, sir," he said simply as he picked up a pencil and made a couple of notes. "It doesn't take eight Loreguard to escort Yoris around, you've hovered over me like I was a criminal that would escape at any minute, and I doubt any of you are adherents of crystalcutting to where you're here to watch me work. If anything, there should be a group of *other* cutters in here watching me, because I have certain specialized skills that aren't taught in the average shop, and they'd get a chance to learn something," he noted dryly, glancing at Yoris, who was decidedly red-faced. "You're in here to gently interrogate me without being blatant about it because you found out that the black fox that escaped from Alamar used my name. I knew it was coming eventually, so I told you the truth. I'd rather tell

you the truth now rather than get dragged to the Black Keep and have the truth dragged out of me by a pain stick. And I think I can prove that pretty easily. I am the king of Itana.”

From behind him came a sudden high-pitched whine of the truth crystal reacting to such a blatant, bald-faced lie, faint but clearly audible in the quiet room.

“Mmm-hmm,” he hummed calmly as he finished his notes, and one of the Loreguard cleared his throat uncomfortably. “Now, you’ve heard the truth out of me. So you can kindly leave and let *real* cutters take those chairs.”

“Not until you answer how you knew the black fox used your name before coming to Avannar, so you’d know not to say anything,” one of them pressed.

“Simple. I heard about it in Atan, when I went back to get ready to come here,” he answered. “Didn’t you hear about what happened?”

“What is that?”

“The black fox showed up *there*, after I sent the letter to Holm telling him I was trying sailing instead of prospecting,” he said. “Being chased by a hunter and a group of Loreguard being led by a woman. The fox escaped into the forest, the hunter and the Loreguard went into the forest after it, and they haven’t been seen in Atan since. Timble tells me in his letters there’s all kinds of rumors flying over what happened, but the village isn’t really sure.”

“Captain Pannen,” one of them said quietly.

“This is new information to me,” one of them said. “Go through what your partner told you.”

“Sure,” he said, then he related the story of how the black fox had been attacked by the hunter in the streets, chased into the mine area, and then escaped, being careful to use neutral terms that could be interpreted by the

truth crystal as truth so long as he was careful about *how* he presented the information. By using terms like *it was said that* and *rumor is that* rather than *I heard* or other direct, first-person statements that the truth crystal would interpret as dishonesty. He also left out the part about the fox being in a collar, so as not to bring any unpleasantness on Virren.

“Well, that does explain a couple of things,” one of them said as Kyven prepared to make his first cut. “Why didn’t the Loremaster in Atan forward that to us?”

“He may have, and it was part of what was taken or destroyed in the attack,” another said in a low tone.

“What ship did you sail on, Steelhammer?” one of them asked curiously.

“A Flauren Arcan trader,” he answered honestly. “It was named in Flauren, never did really find out what it meant. They didn’t like me much, but they were desperate for hands, so they took me. I learned a great deal, but I was glad to be done with them when it was over.”

“Did you like sailing?” he asked curiously, in a less hostile voice.

“It wasn’t that bad,” he answered honestly. “It’s hard work, though. Now I know why you never see a fat sailor.”

The man chuckled. “Tell me about it, I served in the Stinger Bay Navy for two years before joining the Loreguard.”

“So, when that ship was taken over, were you on it?” one of them asked casually.

“Eh?” he asked in sincere surprise.

“A Flauren Arcan trader in desperate need of hands? That’s the ship that was sunk, because the Arcans had somehow gotten loose and taken it over. And it sailed shorthanded because a whole bunch of the crew were killed by some Nurysian maniac.”

“Sounds interesting,” Kyven said mildly, going back to the crystal. “There was a full crew on my ship when I left it.” Yes, a full crew...of Arcan females. “Makes me wonder how the Arcans could sail the ship. That’s not something Arcans are usually taught.”

“Oh, I can answer that for you, Steelhammer,” came a slightly mocking response. “They had help.”

“From?”

“You.”

Kyven laughed, looking back at them. “Me? I’m a crystalcutter, not a sailor. I wasn’t very good at it.”

“You know, that’s the part that really fried my eggs for quite a while,” the same man said casually. “At least until last week, when we got an Arcan in from down Cheston way that turns out was *on* that ship. Little raccoon, very talkative little female. I must say, her description of you is pretty accurate.”

Holy *fuck*. The Arcans on the beach! Some of them had just sat there, waiting for someone to come and catch them! He had completely forgot about them! They’d *seen* him! If the Loreguard had managed to get one of them, she would tell them all about what happened.

He had a cold, cold feeling in the pit of his stomach. If they’d known that before coming to his shop, then everything they’d done up to now was just getting him to talk to see what he gave up before they sprang the trap on him.

“I spent four months investigating that case because of the murders of the sailors at the dock, and it burned my beef trying to make sense of it. Then the ship gets captured by its cargo and the Stinger Bay Navy had to go out and sink it. The whole thing was really confusing, made no sense at all, at least until I just happened to cross paths with a little raccoon working on a plantation down Riyan way investigating the murder of a Loreguard soldier. Scared little thing. The instant I came into the room, she started

singing about a raven-haired human with green eyes who killed the crew of a ship she was on and took it over, who was there because the ship was carrying a Shaman. She told us all about how the human taught the Arcans how to manage the sails and then run the ship aground. You are the spitting image of the description she gave, Steelhammer, and you just admitted that you were on a Flauren Arcan trader. So that means that the human who said he was from the Masked, the human there to recover a captured Shaman, was *you*.”

“An interesting story,” Kyven said idly, putting his hand on the black crystal, feeling the power inside it. “But given that everything I told you was the truth, how does that match up with what you believe? Let me say it again for your truth crystal. When I was discharged from the ship, it had a full crew.”

“Yes, but a full crew of *who*, Steelhammer?” the man asked. “You don’t think we can’t tell a man who’s talking carefully to get around a truth crystal?”

“Put any man on a hot seat, and he’s going to squirm,” Kyven answered evenly. “Even when he has no reason to be nervous.” They had him, and he knew it. Deception would no longer serve him. Now, came the time for guile. His back was to them, hiding his eyes, but there was an unknown here. They had searched him more than once on the way to this room, and as such they were certain that he had no alchemical devices. So, the gamble was, was one of those men carrying a magic sniffer that would detect it if he opened his eyes to the spirits? He wouldn’t need it, for they believed him to be unarmed, and therefore powerless. They had no inkling of just who or what he was, and in this desperate situation, that was his last available weapon.

He wasn’t kidding himself, though. He knew he’d never get off the island alive. Even if he got out of this room alive, there were too many men between him and the city to get past without being discovered. What mattered now was making sure that he created enough of a scene that Shario would know what happened quickly, so he could sweep in and

collect Patches and the other children and get them to safety. His life was over, now came only protecting those he left behind.

So be it. He accepted it not with fear and terror, but with the calm dignity of a man who had more at stake than his own life.

He was glad now, glad that Clover was out of Avannar. Shario would take good care of Patches and the boys, and Patches knew what to do if Kyven was ever killed or captured. She would do what had to be done.

I guess you're going to be irritated, my treacherous totem, he thought wryly, remembering what he told Watcher. *Because all that time you spent training me looks like it was wasted.*

There was nothing left now but the gamble. He put down his hammer, and opened his eyes to the spirits, almost expecting some alarm to whine behind him and then a bullet to rip through his brain a second later. A second went by, and another, and another, and there was no alarm, there was no pistol shot. Clearly, they had come in without a magic sniffer, and that fact was going to give him his last chance at misdirection and guile before all hell broke loose.

First, he built an illusion of himself and the chair in which he was sitting and laid it over himself so smoothly there wasn't even a shimmer. He then slowly, carefully got out of the chair while keeping the illusion there, making sure his illusion muted any possible sound of the chair as he got up. He then built a second illusion, an illusion of a mouse, and carefully separated himself from the illusion of himself and attached himself to the illusion of the mouse. The illusion sighed, then chuckled ruefully as he worked himself along the wall, the little black mouse moving slowly and carefully as it worked its way around the men in the chairs behind the workbench. "After all this, I get caught by the very ones I was there to save," his illusion declared, turning to look at the men, who were now looking quite smug.

Now came the second bit of guile. Now that it was the illusion talking and not him, then *the truth crystal would not react to any lies the illusion*

spoke, because those words weren't spoken by a living thing. Truth crystals didn't react to any sound that didn't come from a person. "You set a fine trap, gentlemen, and it seems that I walked right into it. Well done. I am found and captured."

"So it *was* you, Steelhammer," the man declared.

"It was me, but I'm not Kyven Steelhammer," the illusion said with a slight smile as Kyven got behind the men, and moved quickly yet quietly towards the door. "Oh, he's still alive, most likely somewhere in Eusica by now, and he has no idea he was replaced. We had him targeted to be replaced with an agent of the Masked since he was a boy, and our agent kept a close watch on him, at least until he was killed by a Touched Arcan. I made sure he got on a ship heading far from Noraam for quite a while, captained by a friend of the Masked who promised to *keep* him out of Noraam while we were using his identity. I wonder if he's a good sailor by now," the illusion mused. "Quite the cover, isn't it?" he asked conversationally. "I was trained specifically to take his place because I look just like him, trained to be a master cutter myself. What better way to hide in plain sight than to be an employee of the Loremasters? It put me right inside where I could keep a close eye on you."

"My, we're talkative now," one of them said with a smile. "There's a great many things we're going to talk about, Steelhammer."

"No, we're not," Kyven said simply. "Because in just a moment, I'll be dead, and I'll take all those secrets with me when I die. You think we don't go around without being able to keep our secrets?"

"What are you going to do, try to hold your breath until you pass out?" one of them asked with a scornful laugh.

"No, I'm already dying," he said calmly. "I've been Sealed, gentlemen. When I said *I've been found and captured*, it deactivated the Seal, and now the poison the Seal has held back is killing me. Thank the Trinity it will be a painless death."

"Get a healing bell in here *now*!" the tallest of them snapped as all nine men

suddenly burst into action. But they all skidded to a halt when the illusion seemed to pick up a chisel and held it to his temple.

“Not so fast, gentlemen,” the illusion said softly. “Or you lose what little time you do have and you’ll miss my last taunting confession and what little information it will give you. I’ll be dead long before the healing bell gets here.” The illusion smiled as they all hesitated, even Yoris. “I’m sorry to be something you didn’t expect, Yoris. I did like you, my friend, and I apologize for the trouble I’ll cause you after I’m dead and they try to figure out just how much you knew about me. You were alright for a Loremaster. You deserve better than to be mixed up with them.

“So, here it is, gentlemen, my dying confession. I did it. I’m the cell of the Masked in Avannar you’ve been turning the city inside out trying to find. And I didn’t need any help...after all, I’ve been inside the whole time, right among you, passing on everything I’ve heard to the Masked.” As his illusion talked, keeping their attention, Kyven carefully and quietly opened the door under his tiny illusion and pulled it just enough to slip through, doing so and keeping his eyes on his illusion through the door with his spirit sight, maintaining the necessary visual contact required to use his magic. He couldn’t cast an illusion to any place he could not see. The illusion’s forehead suddenly sheened over with sweat, and the illusion’s eyes seemed to turn a bit glassy, even as Kyven used his spell of cold to freeze the door in its frame, making it impossible for them to get out. The door rimed over in sudden frost, but none of the cutters in the cavernous room, intent on their crystals, seemed to notice that curious event. “Is it hot in here?” the illusion asked in a slightly vacant tone, and started to blink owlishly as the chisel in its hand drooped noticeably.

At that sign of weakness, one of the men lunged for the illusion, his hands aiming at the chisel. But the man passed right through the illusion and crashed headfirst into the edge of the desk, hitting his head on the lip and crumpling to the floor like a boned fish.

“Surprise,” the illusion said with sudden clarity, smiling like a misbehaving boy. “And you thought you had me.” Kyven edged along the

wall, looking through it with spirit sight to maintain the illusion.

“Impossible!” one of them shouted. “How did he fool the detectors and get a device in here?”

“Did you really think I came into this room with you?” the illusion asked with a scornful laugh. “You lost me between the door and this room. While you’ve been toying with *this*, I’ve already gotten off the island. Good luck finding me. For that matter, good luck getting out of this room.”

Kyven cancelled the illusion, then created a new one over the door, covering the frostbound door and smothering it in an auditory illusion of quiet...and not a second too soon, for a few of the men rushed for the frost-covered door, grabbed the handle, then howled in pain and recoiled at the deathly cold of the metal ring. As one man vigorously waved his hand back and forth as if burned, another pounded on the door with his fist, and almost all of them screamed at the top of their lungs...but those sounds were cancelled by the illusion over the door which replaced the men’s reality with a reality of Kyven’s own choosing.

Despite the good start, he still knew he’d never get off the island. They had too many men out there, and the alarm would be raised the instant he left the big room and could no longer hold the illusion over the door. He could try in vain to escape, or he could do what he needed to do to protect his precious friends back at the shop. All he could do now was do as much damage as humanly possible before they killed him, which would alert Shario and Lightfoot and protect the others.

He got all the way across the room before he cancelled the illusion over the door and rushed for the passage, moving far faster than a mouse could manage. The instant he did, the banging on the door became audible, and cutters and two Loreguard stationed in the room looked to the icy door.

And that was all it took.

Almost immediately, alarm bells sounded in the passageway. Kyven managed to get to the stairs and up them and onto the first floor before a

wave of Loreguard crashed down those stairs, heading for the focal point of the disturbance, even as guards flooded the hallways and took up both static positions at intersections and formed roving patrols that were armed with both sniffers and mana grounders, devices that dispelled alchemical devices and magic in a cone in front of the crystal lens of the device, smaller versions of that large device that protected the tower, an alchemical device that defeated other alchemical devices, and also Shaman magic. All it would take would be for either of those to get anywhere near him, and he'd be discovered, so he moved fast. He would do the same thing he did last time, attack the sixth floor, but this time he'd stay and fight, setting more fires, until they killed him, in hopes that he started so many fires that they couldn't contain them all and it destroyed the building. But the only way up there would be outside, so he needed to get out so he could use the blessing to climb up the outer wall to the roof.

Getting there, that was going to be the trick. He was a good fifty rods from any office with a window, and the halls were filling up fast with soldiers. He stayed flat against the wall and edged along as men rushed by him, thankfully not having turned on their devices yet or not bothering to use them in what they thought was an empty hallway. He got nearly halfway to where he knew offices would have windows when one of the rushing men edged a little too far from the middle of the hallway, and his elbow brushed against Kyven's stomach as he tried to get out of the way.

So close...so close.

"Hold it!" the man said in sudden surprise, skidding to a halt. But he never managed to turn around, for Kyven killed the entire patrol literally in their tracks, his blast of withering cold hitting them from behind and freezing them solid in the blink of an eye. The frozen men tumbled to the ground like tipped-over statues, and another patrol of men further down the hall, the way Kyven had come, saw the men seize up and collapse. Kyven still wasn't visible to them, still hidden under his illusion of a mouse, but his attack was more than visible.

“He’s in the main east hall!” Kyven heard behind him as he turned and fled. “He’s invisible! Seal off the passageway!”

He knew soldiers would converge on the passage, so he dashed towards the way out. But he took no more than five steps before a large contingent of soldiers appeared in front of him, the lead man holding a grounder out to stave off a magical attack. He skidded to a halt and looked behind him, and saw the men who had spotted his attack rushing towards him. He was trapped in the hallway, and trapped in a way that would make his magic useless.

Maybe his magic...but not his shadow powers.

Kyven abandoned his illusion at the same time as he abandoned the power of his amulet. He felt his body turn to icewater as it flowed into a new mold, felt the Arcan body replace his human one. When it was over, when warmth returned to his muscles, he caused an explosion of shadow to fill the hallway, concealing him and making the soldiers cry out and skid to a stop before they plunged into it. Kyven dropped to all fours as one of the men panicked and fired a shot into the cloud of shadow, which buzzed over his head and struck a guard on the far side in the shoulder. The man screamed in pain as another man angrily called for no shooting, and that gave Kyven a critical moment to let the shadow flow into him, through him. If he was ever going to learn how to do what his totem did, move through the shadows, it had to be right here, right now. If he didn’t, he was dead, and he was dead long before he could warn the others. If he failed, then Patches, Tweak, and the boys were also going to die.

He could not fail.

He centered himself, feeling the shadow, feeling it not just around him, but inside him, felt it move through him. He needed to join fully to the shadows and melt out of the physical world, then move from one shadow to another and emerge somewhere else. He knew what he had to do. He was one with the shadow. He *was* the shadow, even as the shadow *was* him. He had to melt utterly into the shadow, completely become the shadow, join

fully to the shadow. He could feel the cool wash in his fur start to flow deeper into him, below his skin, into his muscles, all the way down to his bones, felt himself becoming one with the shadow--

And then there was light. Bright, blasting, blazing light, saturating his eyes, behind his eyes, flooding through him the same way the shadow had...but this was not light. It was pain.

He had been joined to the shadow, but that shadow had been banished by the light, banished by a grounder as it was brought to bear against the cloud of shadow...which was a creation of the innate magic of the shadow fox. The loss of the shadow so suddenly when Kyven was joined to it was like a sledgehammer to the head, robbing him of his senses and blasting pain through him. He wilted on all fours, his arms and legs trembling as he tried to make sense of a world that had turned to chaos, but then bright lights popped in his skull, and he knew no more.

The men on both sides stood and stared for a long second as they gazed down at the inert form of the black fox Arcan, the *Shaman*...but he didn't seem so powerful now. One of the soldiers had bravely plunged into the cloud with his musket, and the instant the cloud had been scattered by a grounder, he took up his musket and slammed the stock into the back of the Arcan's head, sending him sprawling senselessly to the floor.

They had captured him at last.

The man who had knocked him out kicked him in the side hard enough to roll him over on his back, and they saw that he was indeed out cold. But it was also unmistakable that it was the Arcan they were seeking, for the black fur with the white ruff and white tips on his ears were complete proof. This was the Shaman that had attacked the building three times, and had to be the one responsible for the murder of a Councilor, a high-ranking Loremaster, a general, and was the one that attacked General Fourpost.

And what was the best of all, they had caught him *alive*. All they had to do was put his eyes out before he woke up, and he would be powerless, and a treasure trove of vital information for the Loremasters.

The man holding the grounder grinned, looking to one of his companions, even as the officer behind them ordered the man with the musket to take his knife out and cut out the Arcan's eyes. The man with the grounder never took it off the Arcan, but despite that, despite being cut off from both alchemy and magic, something *happened*.

The body of the Arcan suddenly erupted with bright light. The man with the grounder quickly thrust the device out even further to make sure he had it aimed at the Arcan, but it did no good, it did nothing to dim that light. Other men with grounders joined their devices to the first man, until three grounders were aimed at the Shaman, but they were absolutely useless. The light infused the entire body of the Arcan, so bright that it made the men flinch away. The light flared incandescently for just a brief moment, and then it faded away to nothingness.

When they looked back at the Arcan, they gasped in consternation and shock.

There was no Arcan laying there now. Now, laying in the exact same position, was a *human*.

A human? A *human*? How was that possible? The Arcan was knocked out! He couldn't have used magic, he had *three* grounders pointed right at him!

It made no sense!

The officer gaped, then gasped. "No!" he screamed when the man he'd ordered to take the Arcan's eyes dropped down with his knife, hurrying to complete the task. "No, don't! Not til we know what the hell's going on! Leave him whole, just keep the grounders on him!"

"They didn't do no good before!"

“I know, but something’s very strange here,” the officer said grimly, looking down at the black-haired man. “We leave him whole until someone higher up the chain decides what to do.”

Humming to herself, Patches washed the last pan in the sink, even as her mind was focused on lunch. She wasn’t really worried for Kyven, because he’d just gone to cut a crystal for the Loremasters, so she busied herself with the mundane tasks of the house servant. She didn’t mind all that much, though. She’d been cooking and cleaning since she could remember, and it was something she understood, something that made her feel useful. She wasn’t brave like the others. She really didn’t do anything here except take care of Kyven and Clover and make sure they had good food, even as Kyven taught her all about being a crystalcutter. But, slight as her duties were, it made her happy to feel like she was contributing to their little group. If she could free up her Kyven’s mind from little things and let him focus on the bigger things, well, that was just fine with her.

Outside, there was a strange sound. She looked towards the kitchen door, saw Lightfoot move through towards the lobby, but she paid it little more mind after that. Lightfoot was...scary. She was nice enough, but she was always so quiet, and the way she looked at people, like they were mice, it was a little scary sometimes. But, she couldn’t deny that she felt safe knowing Lightfoot was around. Lightfoot would investigate, and if there was any trouble, she’d handle it.

It wasn’t trouble...well, not really. Tweak stood up quickly and looked towards something she couldn’t see, but then she heard Lucky gasp. “Come out quickly!” Shario’s voice called, and it wasn’t his usual jovial voice. “Clover! Patches! Come out!”

“I’m here, Master Shario,” she said, scurrying out into the main shop. Shario was standing near the door to the lobby, and his expression was... foreboding. He was looking at Watcher and Lucky, his expression dark. “What do you want? Master Kyven isn’t here.”

“I know, my little chef,” he said grimly. “Where is Clover?”

“Out,” Lightfoot said gruffly “Away from the city until next week.”

“Damn,” he growled. “Well, then it falls to me, she must catch up to you. Come quickly. You must be away from here! They are coming!”

“Who?” Lightfoot asked.

“Loreguard. I just got word, my Arcan friends. Kyven has been captured.”

“But, but they took him to cut a crystal!” Patches protested, dread rising in her.

“Be that as it may, I know that the Loreguard have captured the *black fox* Shaman,” he said. “Any minute, they will show up here, for I have no doubt they have connected the Shaman to our unfortunate friend. I promised him I would care for you should something happen to him and Clover, my little chef. He left me instructions, and I will carry them out. So come, quickly, all of you! I will honor my promise to our friend!”

Patches almost felt like her world was shattering. Kyven...captured? How? *How*? He was so clever, so sneaky! He was so convincing with his illusions! She had seen him talk his way past nearly anyone! How had they managed to make him reveal himself, then manage to capture him? He had always seemed so, so, so *invincible*! It just couldn't be right. It couldn't be!

A rough hand grabbed her arm and shook her. She blinked and saw Lightfoot in front of her, the cat's face emotionless. “Go,” she commanded. “Take the boys and go. Everything else must stay here.”

“Lightfoot,” Shario warned. “You will not stay.”

“I'll catch up,” she said in a dark, dangerous tone. “Meet me at Plum Lane at sunset. I have a duty.”

“The shop?”

She simply nodded.

Shario sighed. “Very well, my little thief. Be very careful, and I’ll see you at sunset.”

She nodded again, turned, and rushed towards the steps to the cellar. Patches knew, she knew what she was going to do. Kyven told all of them what had to be done if something happened to him, and that was destroy all evidence of what had gone on here, and burn the shop to the ground. Patches knew that Lightfoot would risk her own life to stay behind to make sure it was done, even sacrifice herself to see it through to the end. That was how she was.

That was how Patches wished she could be, so incredibly brave.

She stood there numbly for a moment, but the look of fear and concern on Shario’s handsome brown face shocked her to action. Dear spirits, poor Kyven! Was he dead? Did they kill him? Or was he still alive, and facing a torture chamber where the first thing they would do would be to put out his eyes to rob him of his powers, then spend his last hours in this world screaming in pain before he died? He knew they would never make him talk. He was too strong. They would kill him trying to make him talk, but he’d never say a word.

“Kyven,” she sniffed, then she burst into uncontrollable tears, burying her face in her hands.

Shario’s strong arm encompassed her. “I know, my little chef. Come. We must do what we can to honor his wishes, and foremost among them was that you would be safe. So come. Come. I must get you safely to Atan, and we have little time before the Loremasters close off the city or send word ahead. So come, my little chef. I will take care of you.”

Damn that man!

Danna Pannen scratched vigorously at her arm, an arm covered in fur, as she rode along at the head of a long column moving steadily to the south. She was at the vanguard of a mismatched, rag-tag mob of Arcans who tried

very hard to be soldiers, but didn't do very well at it. It certainly wasn't for lack of enthusiasm or determination, though. They tried very hard, but being a soldier wasn't as easy as most people thought it was. There was a great deal to learn, and they hadn't had much time. Firetail had uprooted them from Haven and told them they had to start moving, else they wouldn't be in position to oppose the Loremasters when they came over the mountains. It was a long, long way from Haven to Deep River, a journey that would take an Arcan army a month or more, but would take a human army even longer.

She had to admit a grudging respect of the Arcans, though she'd never say that out loud. So many volunteered to serve in the army, to protect Haven, that they had to turn most of them away. It gave them the chance to go through all the Arcans and pick the ones that would be the best soldiers, the strongest, the fastest, the smartest, and enrolling many of the rejects into support roles such as livestock wranglers, supply wagon drivers, quartermasters, cooks, and attendants that helped the army in any way it could as it moved and camped. On top of those conscripts, they had a core of several thousand *fighting Arcans*, the militia of sorts that protected the lands of Haven before this emergency. These were grizzled, seasoned, *tough* Arcans who were very deadly in a fight, and on top of that, the vast majority of them were very intelligent. Those were now her officers in this army, leading elements of conscripts because they understood fighting and would be able to make critical battlefield decisions that might win a battle. All of them, fighting Arcans, conscripts, and the support workers, were dedicated and focused on the task, a task even Danna had to admit was necessary.

One thing she couldn't fault the Arcans for, and that was their mobility. They moved fast, even this large, disorganized mob that she laughably called an army.

She knew what it would mean for Haven if humans pressed past the Smoke Mountains in any great number. There would be war between the two, war instigated by the humans as they encroached on Arcan lands. She had to admit to herself that she didn't want to see that. In the time she'd

been in Haven, she didn't feel like this was her home, but she had come to care for the Arcans in her own way. She had enough compassion for them to feel that they deserved this place, a place where they could live without fear or enslavement, and while she didn't like the idea of fighting her own people, she couldn't deny that she felt the Arcans deserved a chance to make it on their own. For that reason, and only that reason, she had formed this army. She still didn't think she'd lead it against her own people when the bets were on the table, but she had given the Arcans their chance.

The army was designed based on everything Danna knew about the military, and it was *not* modeled on the Loreguard. Danna was a student of history, part of her inquisitive nature, and she had based her army on historical models, taking the best and most practical elements of armies of history and combining them into a system that worked *for the Arcans*. The army was built on elements that she'd first called squads, but the Arcans had decided to call packs...and that term stuck. A pack of 12 Arcans was led by a sergeant, three packs were led by a lieutenant, and a congregate of 12 packs was led by a captain. Most armies had similar small divisions, but when the time came to fight, they tended to operate in much larger formations. This army would not. It was based on the small element, and it would operate the same way. Communication was no problem, because of the Shaman. A single Shaman could use a spell that caused every Arcan in the army to hear the same command, and it could not be heard by anything but an Arcan. The Shaman could also direct those orders to specific elements, which would give the commander the ability to quickly and securely communicate with any part of the army in real time, which was a critical and huge tactical advantage in modern warfare. Human armies relied on alchemical talkers, which could be attacked and disrupted by other alchemical devices...or by Shaman. Her army would have complete communication, and the commander would have total control of the army at all times.

Weaponry...that was another matter. The primary weapon of this army was the Shaman. A single Shaman could devastate an enemy position with magic, but they had many more uses than that. Shaman had gone out and

used their magic to tame many of the dangerous animals of the plains, and now the army had a component of enthralled Wolverans, Ursoraxes, Tauron, Lupans, and Cougrans. A single Wolveran was a nightmare with which no sane man would want to tangle, yet the Shaman had brought *fifteen* of those nasty brutes into the army, where they acted like friendly puppies and were surprisingly easy to manage. Add to those the massive bear-like Ursoraxes and four packs of wolf-like animals the size of horses known as Lupans and six buffalo-sized big cats that looked like gigantic versions of rock lions, and they had a nasty, nasty core of monsters that would fight on their side. In addition to that, Shaman were supporting the war cause as well. Because they had spells that could shape metal and other items, they were producing the parts that gunsmiths and alchemists needed for their devices far faster than they could be manufactured by normal means, which had dramatically accelerated the production of weapons for the army. A single Shaman could create every part needed for a musket in about three minutes, and then it just came down to a gunsmith taking those parts and assembling them into a finished product. Shaman acted in both direct roles to fight in the battle and support roles to help the army coordinate, communicate, and operate, and that made them highly valuable to the cause. As far as mundane weaponry went, the Arcans were armed with anything they could find, and unfortunately, that meant they were underequipped. Some of them had muskets or pistols, some of them had alchemical weapons, but some had no weapons but knives, clubs, spears, or their teeth and claws. They had organized what weaponry they had so every pack had at least one musket and at least one shockrod or other alchemical weapon, but there was little more. The alchemists and gunsmiths of Haven were working around the clock without rest to produce weapons, but even with the help of Shaman to quickly produce the parts they needed, there weren't many alchemists or gunsmiths in Haven and there were thousands of Arcan soldiers who needed weapons. They were trying their very hardest, but sheer numbers were hard to ignore. Every day, boxes and cases of new weapons caught up to the army, but Danna had done the math and she knew that by the time they reached Deep River, only half of the army would be armed with ranged weapons. Without more ranged weaponry, their tactics would revolve

around night attacks where the Arcans would attempt to get within melee range before being detected, deal damage, then retreat, classic guerilla tactics. And Arcans were *outstanding* guerilla fighters. They could see in total darkness, had powerful senses, and the vast majority of them could move with surprising stealth when necessary, even when encumbered with battle gear. Danna was certain that she could get half her army up to a position's outer perimeter before the sentries had any idea there was anything amiss. With that kind of stealth, an Arcan army could blindside almost any opponent, which got them around the greatest advantage of the enemy, their artillery and muskets.

The Arcans had one true advantage over the invaders, and that was numbers. The army behind her numbered nearly 200,000, where she was sure that no more than 20,000 men were marching in from the east. After all, the Loremasters believed that there was *nothing* out here but the occasional human frontier village and roaming wild Arcans. They had no idea that there was a large nation of coordinated Arcans on this side of the mountains. They would send only what men they needed to secure their position, saving their armies for the east side of the mountains, where the kingdoms of Noraam posed a much greater threat that they could see. But she knew well history, and had read of more than one battle where a vastly outnumbered force with a technological advantage defeated a much larger but more primitive one. Danna had the advantage of numbers, but she couldn't just throw her superior numbers against a fortified position. She had to manage those numbers very carefully, avoid a direct battle until she was absolutely convinced she could win with a minimal of losses to her side. Until she was sure of that, they would use their superior numbers to surround the invaders, then settle in and starve them to death while sniping at them using guerilla attacks conducted at night.

She knew that the invaders would be heavily outnumbered, but she had to save every soldier she could, for one simple reason. When the humans learned of an organized Arcan army on the west side of the mountains, they would march over them in force to destroy it. She had to keep a tight control on things and take absolutely no risks whatsoever, because she was

going to need every soldier, every musket, and every shockrod she could get her hands on *after* they defeated the initial expeditionary force. This was just the first skirmish. The real war would be later, and that would be war of defense as the Arcans protected their home from a human army determined to wipe them out.

It had certainly been a challenge to organize. The Arcans had determination, but no training and no equipment. She was riding at the vanguard of an army armed primarily with sticks, and leading them against a well trained, highly disciplined opponent armed with muskets, cannons, shockrods, and death machines. Given those options, when it did come to fighting, everyone knew that their only chance was to attack from surprise and get among the enemy before they could bring those weapons to bear, because in hand to hand combat, Arcans had all the weapons they needed without picking up a single thing. A death machine could kill hundreds, maybe thousands of soldiers with one use, but it was useless if the enemy was intermingled with friendly troops...unless the field commander was a ruthless bastard. And ruthless bastards didn't keep the loyalty of their men for very long.

But battle would be the last resort. Their plan was to let the invading army settle in Deep River, then cut it off using their superior numbers and choke them, starve them to death through the winter. An army had to eat, and there wasn't enough food in Deep River to feed an army through the winter. After the humans were weakened, if they didn't surrender, then they would attack Deep River, but do so very, very carefully, for the invaders would have had all winter to fortify the town against assault.

She *hated* it when he did this to her, made her wear Arcan fur. It never felt right to her. Kyven said he'd gotten used to being an Arcan, but she sure as fury did *not* feel right like this. She couldn't walk right when she was changed, and she couldn't speak clearly, and unlike him, she certainly didn't get any perks out of it. She didn't get better senses or more strength. It was nothing but skin deep, forced into an Arcan shape but not getting any Arcan benefits, getting the worst of both worlds out of her "bargain."

That *fucking* fox. It was all her fault! She was the one that had approached Danna, speaking through Firetail, and she'd made it sound so logical, that she would be protecting Kyven's life. She still had no idea why on earth she ever agreed to this, but at the time it seemed like a good idea. Well, it sure as hell wasn't a good idea *now*.

She hated this. Hated it! The fur was always itchy, and her deformed legs made her walk like a drunken sailor, and she couldn't speak clearly to save her life, and she scratched herself with the claws more than anything else. And even when she tried to get used to it, usually right as she started getting the hang of things, *poof*, she was herself again, and it was like she forgot it all and had to start over the next time she changed.

And she never knew when! That was what really baked her potato. There was never any warning it was going to happen, just *bang* like a musket shot, and she was changing. Once it had happened when she was in the privy, and that had not been pleasant! At least the changes were painless, just a weird feeling like her bones turned to water...but the threat of being changed at any time often made her go around without shoes at first, since her boots were never made to fit an Arcan's deformed foot. She'd gone barefoot for nearly a week, until a cobbler made her a pair of soft moccasin-like half boots that could contain her Arcan foot when she changed, yet still fit her human foot comfortably. The threat of changing made her a little short-tempered sometimes, if it had been a while since it happened, but always after she returned to herself, changed back to a human, came the calm, easy period where she was much more friendly... since she knew it would be at least as long as she was an Arcan before she could change again.

She still cursed at her stupid decision, and wondered what hair got in her oatmeal that made her agree to such an idiotic thing.

"Stop scratching," Firetail said lightly, padding along beside her walking horse.

“I hrate this,” she growled through her Arcan muzzle, with which it was so hard to make normal sounds! “Hrate it! Whren I gret my hands on that fox, I’m gronna strrangre her!”

“Well, I think you look quite handsome, dear,” Firetail told her with a light smile.

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped. At least riding as an Arcan wasn’t bad, she noticed. They’d started out from Haven two days ago, and it was a blissful two days without changing, spent in the saddle or in tents. She still wasn’t entirely sure about this insanity, but Firetail had managed to talk pretty fast to keep her here. The idea of attacking her own people with an Arcan army really didn’t sit well with her, but the one thing she couldn’t deny was that what the Loremasters were doing was against the treaties they had signed, and the Arcans absolutely could not permit them to gain a foothold in the wildlands. She still hadn’t decided what she was going to do, but for now, she had agreed to ride with the army, to continue to command it until they got down closer to the Loremasters, when she’d decide if she was permanently betraying her own people or if she was holding to at least some shred of her humanity and dignity.

Humanity and dignity. Both had been tested since she’d agreed to help Kyven, because it put her face to face with one of the Shaman’s *spirits*. Looking at it, being able to see it, and listening to it *speak* had shaken her faith in her religion a little bit. Danna had heard very bad things about this spirit, this fox, that she was a dark, uncaring bitch, and speaking with her had cemented that impresson in her mind. She seemed...*cold*. There was no warmth in her voice or her words, and when she broached the idea of Danna helping Kyven, it was all about logic, not about compassion for Kyven. Kyven had once told her that this spirit all but owned him, and didn’t care a whit about him. Kyven was her possession, her *pet*, and her concern for him was more like a warrior’s concern for keeping his musket clean and serviceable more than it was concern for a living thing.

And she knew he was right after talking to her just once.

Maybe that was why she agreed to help, because Trinity, *someone* had to show Kyven a little compassion. She couldn't deny that helping Kyven would keep him safe, and so she agreed to help, because some little corner of her wanted him to be okay, wanted him to live.

Wanted him.

She gasped as a sudden cold wave washed through her. Her bones and muscles seemed to turn to cold water, and she felt herself, well, *pouring* into another shape. She was almost giddy with delight when she realized that she was returning to her normal form, and she was looking forward to about two hours of freedom from the fear of changing at any second. "That's better," she said, shrugging her shoulders, then pushing her hair from her face.

Firetail stopped dead on the road, which caused Danna to rein in her horse and look back. She had the strangest expression on her face, and she was looking down, in front of Danna. Danna glanced in front of her horse, and to her surprise and malevolent glee, that damned fox was sitting in the middle of the road! Now she was going to give that spirit bitch a piece of her mind!

Her eyes blazed with sudden green light, and the amulet around Danna's neck suddenly burned like fire!

She was changing again, but this time it wasn't the cold water feeling, it was like someone poured boiling water into her bones! She gasped, gave a shuddering retching sound, then literally screamed as the amulet around her neck blazed forth with sudden incandescent light, a light that burned into her, infusing her with power, a light that both scoured something inside of her away, and replaced with with something new, something *different*. She felt her muscles lose all control, felt herself falling from the horse, and then she was laying on the ground as the blazing light brought pain, and that pain scoured rational thought out of her.

It lasted only a few seconds, but to Danna, those seconds were an eternity of agony. But mercifully, the pain eased along with the light, and

she was able to think again, to move. She was in Firetail's arms, and the old cougar looked down at her with shocked eyes.

Wait a minute...why was there a muzzle at the bottom of her vision?

She held her hand up, and saw the black fur and the claws. She'd changed again? It was too soon! The amulet wouldn't let Kyven change again so soon after changing back.

"Spirit," Firetail said both reverently and hesitantly. "What has happened?"

"He has been captured by the Loremasters," she answered dryly. "I have returned what I took from him. He is human again."

"Whru--whrat happened?" Danna asked as her head cleared and she could think again.

"I have taken from you what I took from him, female, and restored it to him," the fox intoned in a sonorous voice, her unblinking eyes staring into Danna's own. "He is human again, and you are now the Arcan that replaces him. For now."

"Whrat? Yrou mean I'm *stuck* llike this?"

"Until such time as I have what I want from you," she answered with a sniff.

"Whrat does that mmean?"

"A race cannot be built by only one," she answered bluntly. "When you produce your first litter of shadow fox Arcans, you will give them to Umbra to raise, I will restore your humanity to you, and you will be free. Until then, Danna Pannen, you belong to me."

"Whrat?" she gasped, outraged. "That wasn't whrat yrou said!"

"You did not listen, and made a foolish bargain," she answered, nonplussed.

Firetail, however, wasn't listening to that. "Spirit, what happened to Kyven?" she asked.

The fox turned her gaze to the Shaman. "*He was foolish, and will now pay for his lack of wisdom. But it is of no moment. He has served his purpose. I have no more use for him.*"

"Whrat? Kyven was *captrured*?" Danna gasped.

"*Yes. Fear not that he will betray us, I have wiped such dangerous things from his mind and replaced it with information that will send them down the wrong path. He will tell them what I wish them to know, no more. Once he gives to them what I wish them to hear, he will have served his purpose,*" she sniffed impassively.

Danna could barely comprehend it. "Yrou, *BITCH!*" she screamed, suddenly struggling against Firetail to lunge out and grab that mangy bitch by the neck and shake her til her head fell off! How could she be so *cruel*? Kyven had done everything she told him to do, and now she was just throwing him away like he was *nothing*!

The fox just stared at her with those glowing eyes, slightly amused, then she just *vanished*. Danna could only stare after where she had been fear and shock and outrage and cold fury churning all mixed up inside her. Kyven...captured? They would put out his eyes, then torture him until he told them everything, then they'd kill him! Kyven. Kyven!

"Nro!" she said desperately. "Nro, nro, nro, NRO!"

"Shh," Firetail said gently, keeping firm grip on the newest shadow fox Arcan. "Calmly, child, calmly. It will be alright."

"Nro it won't!" she said, bursting into tears. "They'rr *kirr* him, Firretrair!"

"If that is the way it must be, then that is the way it must be. We can only hope he dies well, child."

"Hrow can yrou say that!" she demanded in a choking voice.

“I say that because I love him, child,” she answered in a sad voice. “There is nothing we can do for him now, child. All we can do is pray to the spirits that they take him quickly, so he does not suffer, and he dies with dignity and honor. For an Arcan, that is a very important thing. We do not fear death when it is a death of our own choosing. Because we love him, we can pray that Kyven’s death may be so.”

Overwhelmed, Danna broke down into wracking sobs, clutching at Firetail like a child. He was going to die...he was going to die....

And she never once told him how she felt about him.

Moving through the realm of the spirits, the shadow fox padded down a familiar path, her feet steady and her mind occupied.

The seeds were sown, both the truth and the lies. Now, as always, came the waiting for the harvest.

Only then would they see the lies within the truth, and the truth within the lies. If they could even understand what they were seeing. Sometimes mortals were very dense creatures, which made it that much easier for her to manipulate them.

It was good. Her Shaman was in the hands of the enemy, right where she wanted him, and despite what she told the mortals, his mind was completely untouched. That was said mainly for their benefit, as much as her pretended indifference to his fate was naught but a goad prodding Danna Pannen to admit a truth within herself. In time, her Shaman would be in the perfect position to do the most good, though he would not understand that until the time came. Returning his humanity had come at the proper time, and would itself serve its purpose in the game about to be played with the Loremasters, just as much as what she did *not* take from her Shaman would serve him well at the proper time, and be the key instrument through which he would serve his purpose. Danna was now hers, having foolishly

bargained away her freedom just as her Shaman had done, and the female would remain hers until it pleased her to let her go.

Guile and deceit.

The fox was content with the progression of things, and would now turn her mind to the last piece of her puzzle, which would also be both the most challenging and the most enjoyable prey to stalk.

Toby Fisher.

Unlike her Shaman or Danna Pannen, the hunter was neither naïve nor foolish. He would be a difficult prey to catch.

But catch him she would. In time, he would belong to her.

It was inevitable.

Chapter 5

He...hurt.

There was pain everywhere, when he finally climbed back out of the black pit. Everywhere. It wasn't excruciating pain, but it was pain. He couldn't remember why he was in pain, and there was nothing but that pain. There was no light. There was no sound. The air in his lungs had no smell. The only sensation, sensory input he had was pain.

But in a way, the pain was good. It told him that he was alive.

Over time, how much he didn't know, the sense of the pain seemed to refine. At first, he was only aware of pain a vague pain that seemed to be everywhere, but then that pain seemed to diverge, to shift, and he became aware of different types of pain. There was a pain in his head that was a dull throbbing that was pounded in his skull with every beat of his heart. There was a sharp pain in his wrists and ankles, as something dug into them, and he became aware of a dull ache in his joints, the ache of joints held in an awkward position for a long time. The divulgence of the pain was still all there was, though. There was still no sound, there was still no light, there was still no smell.

For how long he did not know, the separation of the pain was all there was, as each sensation became more distinct, sharper, until he became aware of a new sensation...cold. His skin was cold. It was cold, even as he felt...water? Water. There was water on his skin.

Skin. Skin...not fur. Skin.

It was like a jolt behind his eyes. He came much more in focus and much of his rational mind came back to him all at once. Yes...skin! Skin, not fur! He felt inside himself, took stock of the sensations that were now coming to his brain, and he realized that there was no tail sprouting out

from the upper cleft of his buttocks. The tail was gone, and his ears were not on top of his head, and his tongue in his mouth revealed a very small, flat mouth filled with human teeth.

That should be impossible. With cognizance came memory, and the last thing he remembered was trying to enter the shadows, trying to enter the shadows in his *Arcan* form. He could only change with conscious effort. He should not be in his human shape now, because he had not enacted the change...and besides, the amulet had to rest once he returned to his Arcan body. It could not have changed him back, unless he'd been asleep for hours.

Wait a minute....

More and more memory came back to him. He had been trying to enter the shadows while in the Loremasters' headquarters, because he had been found out. Not found out as a Shaman, the Loreguard had tracked his activities during his Walk back to him, back when he was a human. They hadn't been after him because he was the Shaman they were seeking, but they had to know he was the one they wanted now. They had seen him, maybe even seen him change from human to Arcan. How did he come to be...wherever he was? And why could he not see or hear anything?

He tried to move an arm. He tensed his muscles in his left arm, and felt them respond. He shifted his arm, but felt something *pull* against his wrist, and pull painfully.

Manacle. It was a manacle. He got more of a sense of himself, and realized that he was vertical, that the pain he felt before was the manacles biting into his wrists, pressing against his hands because he was hanging from them.

Oh, *spirits*. He was in chains.

They had captured him.

No wonder he couldn't see. They must have taken out his eyes. He tried to open his eyes to the spirits, but there was...nothing. Nothing.

Nothing but darkness. All he could feel was something wrapped around the upper part of his face, and he found that his eyelids didn't seem to work anymore...they were sealed shut. He tried to move his eyes, to see if they were under those sealed lids, and he felt nothing against his lids, felt or sensed no movement behind them, though he felt a strange tingling around his upper face and head, a tingling that seemed odd, strange.

He wilted against his chains. Robbed of his eyes, he couldn't even kill himself using magic. The eyes of a Shaman were literally the focus of his power, and without his eyes, a Shaman had no power. They had captured him, they had removed his only way to keep them from learning anything from him, and he again felt the cage of the Ledwell plantation forming around him. He was again a prisoner, again a slave. But this time he would have a short, brutal time before they killed him. He had no doubt they would interrogate him before they killed him, and they would not be gentle.

All he could hope to do was take his secrets to the grave with him.

He steeled himself. He had to do just that. No matter what they did, he had to keep the others safe. He had to protect Clover, protect Lightfoot and the children--if they were still alive--protect Haven and his Shaman brothers and sisters. He could give them nothing.

But...he was human. That still made no sense. Why was he human now, when he could not have changed back? The amulet required him to trigger it through conscious will--

The amulet. It was *gone*. It wasn't there! He couldn't feel it around his neck!

But, but he couldn't be human without that amulet unless--

He almost gasped. The fox *had changed him back*! She had restored his humanity! And that *bitch* had done it at the worst possible time! He could have used his shadow powers to try to escape. But now, if he was human once more, then he no longer had those powers, and that meant that he was truly, completely, and utterly helpless to the merciless Loremasters.

She had *abandoned* him. He realized that now. She saw he was captured, and instead of trying to help him as she did once before, she instead took from him what she gave him to deny the Loremasters the chance to examine his Arcan body and left him behind without a second thought, abandoning him to his fate.

She had betrayed him. And in a mocking action of keeping her word, she had indeed restored his humanity, as she said she would.

It seemed that even when she kept her word, it was filled with guile and deceit.

He couldn't even find any fury in himself over it. It was, after all, her nature...and she could not go against her nature. She had told him that she did not care for him, only cared that he obeyed her. He was no longer any use to her, and so she left him behind, and would not give him another thought. Her tool was broken, so she cast it aside and would seek another.

He was alone.

Wait...or was he?

His spirit was cold and ruthless, but she was *not* stupid. The logical thing to do for her would have been to kill him. If she could change him back into a human, then she could have *easily* killed him, to deny the Loremasters what he knew. But she didn't. She had to have a *reason* for not killing him, she had to have a *reason* for leaving him alive and in the hands of their enemies. There was something she wanted him to do here, there had to be. Some part of the plan she had that she didn't show him. She had abandoned him to die, yes, but it was clear that she wanted him to do *something* before that happened. The stakes were too high in this game for her to risk Kyven's vast knowledge of the Shaman and Haven to fall into the hands of the Loremasters. She didn't care about him, but she *did* care about the big picture, else she'd never have set Kyven on his path in the first place.

And what of him? Would he play that part? Would he still obey his spirit even after she threw him to the wolves?

Yes. Too much was at stake, and this wasn't about *him*. He was just a soldier on the battlefield, and in this battle, he was expendable. All that mattered was his duty to the Arcans, his duty as a Shaman, to protect the defenseless, serve the spirits, and try to stop the Loremasters from doing the unthinkable. He was *needed*, and he would serve that need.

For him, there would be no happy ending. But so long as there was a happy ending for the Arcans, then he would be content. That would be *his* happy ending. That would be his little victory.

All he had to do was figure out what she wanted him to do. Once he did that, he would be ready to meet the spirits face to face...if that indeed was what happened to Shaman when they died, as Clover said. According to Clover, a Shaman who died became a spirit himself, to serve the spirits beyond the flesh, while the spirits of others...moved on. Kyven didn't really believe that, but if it was true, maybe he'd get a chance to punch the shadow fox in the mouth for everything she put him through when he was alive.

That thought comforted him. He should have been terrified to be hanging by chains in the clutches of the Loremasters, but he felt an odd peace. He knew he had something to do here, and because of that...he had nothing to fear. He was a *Shaman*, and he would act like one. Clover wouldn't whimper or whine in her chains, she would stand tall and act with dignity, even under the whip. He would do the same. They would not get the satisfaction of seeing him cower in fear.

But that didn't change his situation much. He could see nothing, hear nothing, could only feel the pain of hanging by manacles and a throbbing in his head that came from a knot just over his left ear. They must have hit him with something, but he couldn't remember. There was nothing for him to do but hang there, hurt, and wait.

Time is a funny thing when one has no concept of its passage. He honestly had no idea how long he hung there, for the only indication he had of the passage of time was the change in the pain in his body. The throbbing in his head eased, but the pain in his arms and body increased from hanging with his full weight on those manacles for longer and longer. His feet were not on the ground, and they were also chained slightly behind him, forcing him to lean forward with his arms more behind him, adding to the awkwardness of the position and therefore the pain it caused. He swam in a haze, where it was hard to think, which he thought was because he was hit in the head, and hit hard. That blow had addled him, caused him to drift in and out of periods of rationality, but over time, the pain of the blow to his head did fade, and with it came a more solid concept of the passage of time. That time dragged by as the pain in his arms and back got worse and worse...and then he heard something.

It was faint. Very faint. At first, he thought it was just a figment of his imagination. But he heard...the sound of his own breathing. He was sure of it. He inhaled, and *heard* the sound of the air filling his lungs. Slowly, he became aware of another sound, the faint rattle of chains from somewhere above him, the chains holding him up. He shifted his hand, and heard the very faint yet unmistakable sound of to chain links clicking together. Quicker than he thought, his ears seemed to recover from whatever had rendered them useless, and he became aware of more sounds. The faint dripping of water far distant. He thought he heard the scraping of a boot, but it was such a faint sound that he wasn't sure. Then he heard faint skittering of a type that told him it was a mouse or other small creature.

His nose seemed to wake up, too. His Arcan sense of smell was gone, but he could smell dank, almost stale air, air that was cool, almost cold, moist, and unpleasant both in his lungs and against his skin. He could smell the faint odor of detritus, the smell of human waste, and could smell both the tang of sweat and the metallic scent of blood. Probably his own blood.

A voice. A very faint voice, from a distance, or maybe through a door. He couldn't make out what it said, but it was clear to him it was a man, speaking in a low tone, probably to someone standing just beside him or

very close to him. Guards, maybe? It had to be. If he was hanging from chains, then he had to be in a place that was set up for it, and needed to be close to where they would torture him. Torture wasn't a business one conducted without having the proper tools available, so that meant they either had to bring those tools to him, or take him to those tools...and odds were they would take him to the tools. Those tools would be in a secure location where they could keep him under complete control, and where his screams wouldn't arouse any attention or upset anyone of a mild disposition. He had to be in a jail or dungeon, either under the Loremaster headquarters or in the fabled Black Keep, the prison of the Loremasters and the Free Territories.

Another voice, and it seemed to be growing stronger. It was moving closer. Another voice, deeper, rougher. It too was moving, getting stronger, moving closer. The sounds of footsteps, more than one. Yes, people were moving, moving towards him.

He felt no fear as he realized that the time had come, and they were coming for him.

He was certain he was in a dungeon when he heard hinges squealing in protest as a door was opened. It was hard to tell if it was in front of him or behind him, but it was definitely either or. He was hanging parallel to that door. The voices stopped when the door opened, and he imagined the visitors were standing at the door, regarding him hanging there motionless with his head hanging down, unsure if he was awake or unconscious.

A man in terror would have hung there silent as the grave, hoping they would think him unconscious and leave him be at least for a little while longer, but Kyven was not a man with fear inside him. "I do hope I'm not offending any sensibilities," he said in a weary, weak voice. "If there's a lady present, I apologize, for I do think that I'm not wearing anything."

"You'll offend no sensibilities here," came a rather casual response, by a young man from the sound of it. He could hear movement, and picked out four separate people standing near each other.

“That’s a relief. Trinity forbid I give some impressionable young lady impure thoughts.”

“I doubt she’d be that pure if she got excited at the sight of a man in chains,” the voice said with a wry chuckle.

“He won’t be chatty long,” came a growling reply.

“Oh, leave off, Barker. I rather like the man chatty. Maybe that means our job will be easier. He certainly seems to grasp his situation, and with far more dignity than other men, I might add.”

“A man has little but his dignity when hanging naked from the ceiling,” Kyven said sagely, which actually made one of them laugh.

“Ah, but you see, that’s one of the little things we’re going to talk about,” the young man said lightly, and from the sound of wood scraping, Kyven got the feeling he was sitting on a chair. “When we caught you, you were the black fox Arcan Shaman we’ve been searching for. But the instant we put grounders on you, you show yourself as a human, so we can only assume that the black fox was nothing but an elaborate disguise to conceal the truth of you. Which, naturally, is impossible, so what we think is that you’re an Shaman transformed into a human by magic so you could get past our defenses. Quite a curious little development, isn’t it? So, one of the loose ends we’ll be tying up is figuring out just *what* you are, my dangling friend.”

“I do hope my dangling looks menacing. I think this is where I’m supposed to make some foolishly brave comment about how you’ll never make me talk. I do so hope I can live up to your expectations.”

“He’s fearless, alright,” a new voice spoke up.

“A man in the right has nothing to fear,” Kyven said simply. “When you’re done with me, I’ll go on to my reward. How could a man show fear in the face of that? A little pain now is a good trade for an eternity of happiness.”

“Now he talks like a Eusican,” a fourth voice noted, the final unidentified person in the room.

“No, he talks like a *Shaman*,” the young man said intently. “But let’s start simply, my hanging friend. We’re here to have a little chat in the presence of a truth crystal. We’ll ask questions, and you will answer. If you speak the truth and answer the question to our satisfaction, we move on to the next question. Every time you lie, or every time you refuse to answer, we jab you with a pain stick. You know what a pain stick is, don’t you?”

“Intimately,” he said, shuddering a little deep inside. He thought they would torture him with branding irons or blades, that they would be afraid to use an alchemical device on someone they suspected was a Shaman...but he guessed they felt that without his eyes, he was powerless and therefore the pain stick was the most effective tool. He’d never considered them using a pain stick...maybe because that was something he didn’t particularly want to face. It was certainly the best choice. It was easy, it didn’t make a mess, and it didn’t require any extensive preparations...and a pain stick could incite far more pain than any other form of torture, with the added bonus of doing no actual injury. Just the memory of the pain of the Ledwell’s collar was enough to make him go cold inside...but he would show no outward fear.

“After we talk a while, if you behave and cooperate, we may even take you down from there and let you sleep a little in a more comfortable position.”

“I see you haven’t put your truth crystal out yet,” Kyven said lightly, inwardly steeling himself for what he knew was going to come. “I’d be expecting to hear it go off after a whopper like that. You’ll learn what you want to know from me, and then you will kill me. Then you’ll hang my body from the gibbet outside the Black Keep as a warning to others not to cross the Loremasters...which won’t make a whit of difference, because the world already thinks the lot of you are fools.”

“I’d be careful who I called a fool in this room, prisoner,” the gravelly-voiced man growled.

“Oh please. Idle threats at this point? Put up or shut up.”

And the world exploded in pain.

Kyven was proud of himself that he did not scream. He knew it was coming, had goaded them into it on purpose, and he was ready. His body did jerk and convulse slightly as it was assaulted with pure agony, washed to his bones in acid, and he gritted his teeth and clenched his eyelids shut tightly, gripping the chains attached to his manacles in a grip that nearly broke his finger bones. But he did not cry out. The tormentor only held the pain stick to him for a brief second, but that was like an eternity when it came to those cursed objects. The pain vanished as quickly as it came, leaving Kyven weak and trembling, wilting against his chains...but he did not cry out.

“Want me to put up again, you nothing little shit?” the gravel-voiced man growled.

“You should check the crystal in that pain stick. I think it’s about done,” Kyven said in a weak, panting voice, but his tone was light and off-handed.

“How much help did you have, Arcan?” the deep-voiced man asked. “How many are in your cell?”

“Why, the entire city helped me,” Kyven chuckled weakly. “Even your own Loremasters and Loreguard helped me. You made it so *easy*.” He raised his chin, and his hopes soared as he realized an important point. “Found the shop burned to the ground, didn’t you?” he asked conversationally.

There was a brief yet pregnant silence that told Kyven volumes.

They had got out! Bless the spirits, they had got out! Praise be to Shario, that clever, clever man! He got them out!

“Shut up! We ask the questions here!” the gravel-voiced man snapped angrily.

“Oh, we know all about your Arcan helpers, and we’ll have them soon,” the young man purred. “After all, they won’t be hard to find. But let’s not jump around. I think we should start with introductions, after all. My name is Major Will Savage, and you will address me as Major, or Major Savage. And you are?”

“The king of Itana,” he answered pleasantly, and immediately heard a faint whine from their truth crystal. “You may address me as your Imperial Majesty.”

And the world exploded in pain.

Again, Kyven did not cry out as his body jerked and recoiled from the pain stick held against the pit of his stomach. His back arched severely as he gritted his teeth, and then the pain stick was removed, bringing blessed, wonderful relief.

“I’m sure we’d like to keep this civil,” the man named Savage said calmly.

“You forgot to say *your Imperial Majesty*,” Kyven corrected him.

He paid for that bit of impertinence as well, as the pain stick was pressed against him and held against him longer, making him start to convulse after a few seconds, pain scouring away everything but the feeling that he had been dropped into Hell.

“We have all day, Master Steelhammer,” Savage said in a relaxed manner. “And lots of crystals for our pain stick. All you have to do is cooperate, and it can be much more pleasant. We are civilized men, and contrary to your beliefs, we don’t particularly enjoy having to do this.”

“Then I hope I single-handedly cause a crystal shortage for crystals that fit in pain sticks,” Kyven said weakly. “I think if I force you to use more barbaric forms of torture, you might be too squeamish to be serious

about it. Because you're such civilized men, you understand. Do you faint at the sight of blood?"

He paid for that, too. The stick was held against him for nearly fifteen seconds, and his teeth clenched for so long that he almost felt like they were going to shatter as he endured unspeakable agony.

"You will address me as *Major*," the man said, less polite.

"I will do anything that pisses you off, if only because it amuses me," Kyven answered immediately.

"I think we need to take the sass out of him, Major," the gravel-voiced man urged.

"I do believe you're right, Sergeant. We'll go have some coffee while you take care of it."

The gravel-voiced Sergeant was a man whom Arthur Ledwell would have admired, for he clearly enjoyed torturing people. For nearly half an hour, Kyven endured applications of a pain stick that left him so weak that the blows to his face and stomach from a man's fist barely registered, almost felt like love taps in comparison. Nothing could compare to the agony that could be exacted with a pain stick, and compared to that, his need to beat Kyven's body was as nothing. The gravel-voiced man never said a word, never made a sound outside of sharp exhales that accompanied his punches into Kyven's prostrated stomach and chest. He would hold the pain stick to Kyven until he was about to pass out from the pain, and then relent and let him recover while he amused himself with blows to Kyven's body.

Kyven's Shaman training served him well over that agonizing time. His body was in peak physical condition, and tensed muscles absorbed much of the impact of the physical blows safely, even as his Shaman stamina allowed him to quickly recover from the aftereffects of the pain stick. But over time, he began to weaken, to tire. Resisting the pain stick

was much harder than working with magic, and tired him quickly. But he continued to try to resist.

By the time he heard the other three men file back in, he was trembling and exhausted from the pain stick. It was harder to think now, and he couldn't seem to keep his breath, and his muscles were shivering violently. He'd never been exposed to a pain stick for that long before, and could only guess what kind of effect it had on a body over time. "Now that you're less sassy," the major noted in a calm voice. "Let's start again, shall we? What is your name?"

"Major...Will...Savage," he answered between heavy breaths.

"Not what is my name, what is *your* name?" he demanded in a harsher tone.

"Why...I don't really know...what a *your name* is. I've never thought...about it."

"Sergeant."

And the world exploded in pain. Kyven again refused to scream as the pain stick burned into his very soul, but then the pain seemed to waver, then weaken...then it vanished. He could feel the tip of the pain stick against his stomach, and he laughed weakly. "That's...one...crystal," he declared between heavy pants of breath. "I do...hope...you have...extras handy."

There was a quiet grumbling, and he heard one of them stump towards the door. As he hung there, weary, exhausted, he pondered something curious that had just occurred to him as the pain stick was applied. They had taken his eyes, and his eyes were the focus of his power...but were they *all* of his power? He couldn't cast spells, and since he couldn't open his eyes to the spirits, he couldn't channel magic from the spirit world into the material world. But...could he use energy that was *already here*? He didn't have to be able to see in order to use a blessing, and since he would be shaping the power himself, he didn't necessarily need the fox's consent either.

Not that that would be much help, since he only knew two blessings, and neither would help him here. But, what he could do is stockpile that power, and try to use it to kill himself. Now *that* he thought he might be able to accomplish.

It couldn't be blatant, if he tried and it worked. If they jabbed him with a pain stick and it didn't work, they might figure out that he had drained the crystal. They thought he was a Shaman, which was why he couldn't see now, and they thought they had neutralized his power. If he didn't drain enough power to kill himself, then they'd react, and it might not be pretty. The pain stick would definitely be replaced then, replaced with red-hot irons, serrated blades, barbed hooks, ropes and chains, and all the trappings of what most people imagined a torture chamber contained.

He heard gravel-voice return to the room, heard something smack against a hand, probably some auditory warning to Kyven that he had a new pain stick, but Kyven wasn't paying attention to that right now. He was focusing on the strange tingling that still persisted around his upper face and head, because when he started pondering the possibility of draining a crystal, that tingling, faint but tactile, seemed sharper to him.

Tingling...of course! Why didn't he realize it before, he felt that tingle all the time in his *fingers*! He must have been more addled by that blow to his head than he thought, it made him miss something so obvious!

They had something alchemical wrapped around his head!

He searched that tingling with his senses, and found it. There was definitely a crystal there, he could *sense* it now that he was actively looking for it. It was attached to him through what felt like a mesh of metal wire cloth wrapped around his eyes like a bandage.

The question now, was, *why* was it there? He had to find out. He had to trick one of them into saying something about the device that might help him understand it.

"Are you or are you not Kyven Steelhammer?" the major demanded.

“I am...and I’m not,” he answered, a bit more stable now that he had a moment to rest and recover. “I am both.”

“The truth crystal disagrees with one part of that statement, Master Steelhammer,” the major warned. “You’d better clarify before the Sergeant takes issue.”

“Then let me say that I *used to be* Kyven Steelhammer.”

“Then who are you now?” another asked after a pause.

“Kyven Steelhammer,” he answered simply.

“Took the name after he replaced the real one,” he heard a bare whisper. Spirits, were they dense! Confronted with incontrovertible proof that a human had used Shaman magic, they still would not accept what they had seen. They believed him to be an Arcan changed into a human by magic...when the reality was the exact opposite!

“Who were you before?” another voice asked.

“Kyven Steelhammer,” he answered. When he heard a long silence, he knew that this statement, which passed muster with their truth crystal, was now giving them a bit of trouble.

“Are you the same Kyven Steelhammer that is registered with the guild as being trained in Atan by Master Holm?”

“That’s the identity I once possessed.”

“Since you seem to know how to talk around a truth crystal, I want a yes or no answer, or you get fifteen seconds with the pain stick,” the major warned. “And if you don’t answer, you get *thirty* seconds. “Now answer the question.”

“No.” Silly man, he didn’t specifically ask *which* question Kyven was to answer, therefore any answer he gave would be correct so long as he thought of a question for which that answer was the right one.

“Then where did you learn to appraise and cut crystals? What artisan taught an Arcan such skills?”

“A dead man who is beyond your reach,” he said with a slightly amused voice.

“What was his name?”

“Whose name?”

“The man who taught you?” came an annoyed response.

“Aven,” he answered. The man didn’t ask *what* he was taught, and Aven had taught him quite a bit about prospecting. “Don’t bother looking for him, he’s dead. Was killed by a Touched Arcan about a year ago.”

“Alright then, how did you manage to become human, Arcan? What magic is this?”

“No magic did this,” he said simply, which was true. Magic didn’t change him, his spirit did. Just how she changed him, he couldn’t say exactly, and since he wasn’t *sure* she used magic in the sense to which the man was referring, therefore his statement was not untrue.

“He’s cheating the truth crystal, Major,” the older voice called out. “He clearly knows how they work. You’ll have to question him as if he was testifying at a trial. Everything must be explicit.”

“Well then, let’s begin again, and if your answers don’t match what you’ve already given, we’ll have to make sure you pay for it,” the major said calmly. “Is your name Kyven Steelhammer?”

“Yes,” he answered.

“Are you the same Kyven Steelhammer trained by Master Holm of Atan?”

“Yes,” he answered, seeing no other way to interpret it that would allow him to cheat the crystal. He would give them the little things they

probably already knew, and save his strength for enduring the pain stick when it came time to refuse to answer the important questions.

“Impossible!” he heard one of them whisper.

“Are you a Shaman?” he asked directly.

“No. I’m not.” Without his eyes, he *was not* a Shaman. Take that, truth crystal and explicit questions.

“We have documented evidence you used Shaman magic!” the fifth man finally called, who sounded like an old man.

Kyven laughed scornfully. “You have no idea,” he said cryptically.

“So you admit that you *are* Kyven Steelhammer, crystalcutter, Artisan, trained by Master Holm of Atan?”

“I am,” he admitted.

“Then how did you use magic?” the major demanded. “What alchemical device did you have that allowed you to look like an Arcan and mimic the spells of a Shaman?”

“That device was destroyed when you put the grounders on me,” he answered honestly. That *was* when the foxhead medallion was destroyed, he had to guess, because it wasn’t on him now. And it *did* give him the power to look like an Arcan...sort of.

“Who made it for you?”

“No body did,” he said cryptically. Since the fox was not a living thing with a *body*, therefore to say that no *body* made it for him was essentially correct. That they would construe his response as *nobody* rather than *no body* was not his affair.

“What is the name of the one who made that device?” the older voice demanded, seeing through his trick.

“Names are like clothes, who knows which is the cloak and which is the shift?” he answered simply. “Names are a dangerous thing, and best left packed in your suitcase with your underwear.”

“You’re getting perilously close to tasting the pain stick, Steelhammer,” the major warned.

“My dear fellow, I haven’t spoken a single truth since you started questioning me,” Kyven said lightly. “I do indeed know how truth crystals work, and I can get around them, no matter how careful you think you are in framing your questions. I can make yours get up and dance across the table, if you’d like. Want to see it?”

And the world exploded in pain. He still refused to scream, refused to give them that satisfaction, kept his teeth clenched as he endured the agony that only a pain stick could inflict, like his blood had turned to fire inside him.

He heard them discussing something when he recovered enough to hear something other than the pounding of his own heart, speaking in low murmurs that he couldn’t make out.

“Sergeant, I believe he needs more sass taken from him. Work him until he screams. No matter how long it takes. Maybe by then, he’ll be ready to answer honestly, when he faces an equal length of time under the pain stick as it takes for him to scream each time he fails to satisfy me with an answer.”

“I hope you have plenty of crystals,” Kyven murmured.

He had no idea how long it took. The Sergeant applied the pain stick to him, and held it to him for what seemed an eternity. His body jerked, convulsed and spasmed, and the indescribable pain caused his heart to flutter, caused his lungs to burn as he exhaled and refused to inhale so as to be *incapable* of screaming, even if they made him do it. It was endless, ceaseless pain, applied expertly right up until the verge where he would pass out, then it was removed and he was given some brief period to pant

heavily and recover somewhat before it was applied again. The Sergeant made not a single sound as he systematically tortured Kyven to the brink of unconsciousness, again, and again, and again, and again. Every time, it seemed, the pain lasted longer. Every time, it seemed, he would surely die from the trauma, from the stress the pain stick put on his body. But every time, it didn't happen. Rational thought was scattered to the winds as Kyven's mind withdrew from the pain, retreated deep inside himself, leaving only one unalterable command: *do not scream*.

And he did not. Right up until the pain stick was held just a second too long, through what seemed an absolute eternity of mind-shattering pain, Kyven did not scream. It could have been ten seconds later, it could have been ten days later, but when the pain stick was applied just a touch too long, it caused Kyven to spiral into blessed, welcome blackness, and know no more.

It was again the pain that he felt first, before anything else. It was worse now, as his arms and body protested vociferously being held in that awkward position, which told him that he was still hanging by chains from his cell. There was an oozing sensation on his forearms, which told him that his wrists were now bleeding, the skin rubbed away by the manacles and now biting into raw open wounds.

How long had he been unconscious? He had no idea. All he knew was that it was unnaturally quiet...that, or his ears weren't working again as they hadn't been when he woke up the first time.

He had achieved his first little victory. He had not screamed. He *knew* that he didn't scream. The Sergeant had literally tortured him into unconsciousness, but he did not scream. By now, he knew, they were debating this. They now knew they were dealing with someone whom they very well may kill before they got any useful information out of him. Kyven was a Shaman, and even though he was no longer an Arcan, he still had the physical conditioning. He was stronger than any man in the building, he

was certain of that, and he had the endurance of a mule. That formidable physical conditioning was what was giving him the strength to defy the pain stick, and he would *die* before giving them a single thing....

A single thing he did not *want* them to know.

As he came back to consciousness, he realized he had to look at this situation as his totem would. She had abandoned him to this fate, but there was something she wanted him to say or do before he died. Being a spirit of guile and deceit, it told him that what she wanted him to do was trick the Loremasters, probably give them some bit of information that turned them on their ears and disrupted them to the core.

Well, that was easy enough. Was that all she wanted him to do? Admit he was a *human* Shaman?

That would certainly put them into total chaos. The foundational cornerstone of the Loremaster position that Shaman were twisted, evil creatures bound to sinister forces. If they found out that humans were becoming Shaman, then they would see that as a spread of that dark infection, a direct assault on humanity itself. But under that religious foundation was a much more frightening one to the Loremasters; human Shaman could infiltrate their organization and expose all their dark secrets, just as Kyven had done. They had worked for centuries to wipe out the Shaman, and they feared them above all other things in this world. The fact that no Arcan was allowed to even set foot on the island holding their headquarters showed that fear to the world. If the Loremasters had proof that humans were Shaman, then they would all but self-destruct as they desperately tried to find out *how many* humans had become Shaman, and try to destroy them. But that would be impossible. A Shaman was completely indistinguishable from other Arcans unless he used his powers, and the same would hold for the humans.

The Loremasters would go nuts, knowing that there were *human* Shaman out there working against them, and all their elaborate precautions, which were aimed at Arcans, would mean *nothing*.

Yes, his totem would salt lies with that little bit of truth, and throw the Loremasters into disarray. As would telling them that their secret was out, that the kingdoms of Noraam *knew* about their perfidy. That would force the Loremasters to devote most of their resources and energy towards keeping the alliance that gave them complete power together until *they* were ready to dissolve it...which would fail. Flaur was already leaving the alliance, and Kyven figured that as more and more kingdoms learned of the treachery of the Loremasters, they would follow suit. The more the Loremasters had to keep their eyes focused on *this* side of the Smoke Mountains, the better it would be for Haven.

That was what he must do. Admitting he was a Shaman would ruin any chance he might have to use it to escape...but that was a moot point. They had taken his eyes and put this device over his face, and without his eyes, without being able to see, escaping from this place would be all but impossible. Even if he could use magic, him stumbling around looking for the door would make escaping just a tiny bit difficult.

They may not even believe he was a Shaman since he couldn't use magic.

He just wanted it done, so he could die. Being tortured into unconsciousness wasn't very fun, and this place was starting to get to him in a way that had nothing to do with his tormentors. He was hungry and thirsty, and that triggered a terror far more effective than anything the Loremasters could throw at him, a lingering trauma from his time in the Ledwell's cage. He had a nearly phobic fear, a terror, of starving to death, of dying of thirst, and internal fears like that were far stronger than the kind of fear the Loremasters were trying to instill into him to make him talk.

Yes, these men knew *nothing* of true torture. Coming hours from dying of starvation in plain view of dozens of people, and having a sadistic monster eat and drink in front of you while it was happening, *that* was true torture.

He sighed and raised his head, feeling nothing but pain and exhaustion, reaching out with his senses, but he felt his hearing return quickly, even as he heard the steps coming towards him. Maybe this thing on his head rendered him deaf unless they wanted him to hear, to make it that much harder to try to escape. That could certainly be it, though it was a silly point. Maybe it was another torture mechanism, sensory deprivation to augment the terror, the fear of waiting, of never knowing.... That would work on some men, but not Kyven, for he had nothing to fear from these men. He was a Shaman, he would stand tall and proud and not fear death so long as his death served the spirits and the Arcans. The only fear he had in him was fear of failing his totem, and the lingering phobia of starving left in him by the Ledwells.

He knew almost immediately what was coming when he heard the door open, and only one set of footsteps entered the room. The promise was unfulfilled, and until it was, they would not stop. They would not stop torturing him and start asking him questions until he screamed.

And he intended for them to break that promise, for fear that they'd kill him before they got anything out of him. Though a pain stick did no physical harm, it *did* put stresses on the body. The weaker the victim, the more apt a pain stick was to cause them to die from the shock.

"You are going to scream," the gravel-voiced sergeant said in a dreadfully eager voice. "And I think you owe me a scream on top of that.

And before Kyven could offer a tart response, the world exploded into pain.

The sergeant was as effective with his pain stick as he was sadistic. It took a cruel, twisted man to train and practice to bring a man to the brink of passing out with a pain stick over and over, inflicting unspeakable agony, and not either be horrified by it or enjoy it. This man was the kind that enjoyed it. For how long, Kyven had no idea, he was repeatably tormented with a device whose soul function was to make someone feel like they had been cast into Hell. Every time, he could feel consciousness slipping away

as the pain stick was held to him for an eternity, and each time, the man expertly removed the stick just a second before he dropped into that abyss. Minutes passed, or hours, or maybe years, and the cycle continued of being tortured with the pain stick to the brink of unconsciousness, only to be denied that sweet oblivion. His Shaman-trained endurance worked both for him and against him, as it gave him the strength and focus to fight the pain enough not to scream, but it also gave him a strength that caused him to remain strong and conscious long after weaker men would have either passed out or died from the trauma of the pain stick.

Kyven lost all sense of rationality, after a while. Logical thought escaped him, all rationality retreated into the deepest recesses of his mind, leaving only a vacant, unthinking mind that knew only pain, knew only that no matter what, it could not scream, that no matter how unbearable the pain was, something *even worse* would happen to him if he screamed. It just kept on and on, pain sweeping him towards a dark pit, only to drag him back away from the edge over which he so desperately wanted to jump. That was his little victory, that was his refuge from the pain, that black hole deep in himself, and it was to that point the clawed and struggled to reach. But the pain was an effective shackle holding him in the conscious world, until the one time the shackle seemed to have just a tiny bit too much slack. Kyven reached his goal, lunged over the edge and into the pit, and found, if only for a moment, the sweet nothingness of oblivion.

But that itself was a lie. He became aware of something jabbing him in the stomach, something that felt like a cane's tip, and the conscious part of his mind that had been huddling in the dark tunnels of his subconscious like a child realized that the crystal in the pain stick had been depleted.

That was two.

"Two...down," he whispered so feebly that he wasn't sure if he even made a sound.

"Then you owe me *four* screams, you piece of shit," the sergeant growled, and Kyven's drooping head snapped to the side as the man

punched him, punched him hard enough to fracture his cheekbone.

What the pain stick couldn't accomplish, the brutal punch had. Kyven spiraled down into the welcome darkness like a traveler stepping across the threshold of a house unseen and missed for a long, long time.

Pain.

Eventually, that was all there was. All else succumbed to pain, the pain in his arms and back, the pain in his head from his broken cheekbone, the shuddering pain of a body that had been subjected to a pain stick for so long that now there was a lingering pain in every cell of his body, as if a pain stick had taken up residence inside of him. The pain scoured away his rational mind, and over some time--how long he had no idea--of being tortured to unconsciousness, of being weakened from no food and no water, Kyven's mind began to wander.

He could no longer remember how many times he'd been tortured, it was as if his entire life had been spent in this terrifying darkness, where the sudden arrival of sound in his ears was naught but the realization that he was awake, and also that he was about to be sent back into oblivion only after he was tortured to the brink of madness. The only thing he knew, the only thing to which he clung from his rational mind, was the fact that he had not screamed. He had not made a single sound since he had uttered the words "that's two."

But it wasn't the pain that had the most effect on him, it was the horrid, horrifying emptiness inside him. Kyven's mind reacted to his starvation like a child confronted with a monster, and that was sheer terror and a desperate need to flee, to escape. He feared his hunger far more than he feared the footsteps entering the room, because at least the footsteps eventually brought blissful unknowingness, where the emptiness inside him threatened to consume him from within. The deep subconscious of his mind remembered the cage, remembered the torment, remembered what it felt like to be so hungry that it took a man's very soul. That was a feeling that

he never wanted to feel again, feel the burn of his muscles as a dehydrated body consumed its own tissues to survive, to be so hungry that he would eat stones if only to fill the terrifying emptiness at his core.

Kyven's will was powerful and his body was strong, but the strongest body could not last long without water. Some hazy part of him was aware of that, that he would die of dehydration, that his raw wrists had stopped oozing blood if only because there was little blood left to seep out. He was weakened from the repeated tortures, debilitated by his injuries, and his life had drained away to hang by a thread by the seeping drops of blood that escaped the tortured flesh under the manacles that held him suspended over the floor.

He was so far gone that as he hung there, he distinctly heard and felt his left shoulder dislocate, pulled out of its socket by the stress placed on it by the manacle and the awkward position. But even that injury was painless. He was only aware of it because he had felt his shoulder pull free, and felt a strange new pressure on his shoulder and arm as he hung by a slightly different angle.

No matter how hard he tried to keep focused, he felt his mind slipping away, overwhelmed by hunger, thirst, exhaustion, and trauma. He drifted in a haze, a shadowy world where the present and the past were all mixed up, a world of shades and spectres conjured by a delirious mind. He was again in the cage, chained to the roof, feeling the fire in his veins from no water, the fire in his throat, and the all-consuming hunger, even as he watched the Ledwell family enjoy a breakfast out on their back porch. Every bite ripped out his very soul as they ate in front of a starving man, a man who wore a collar that would destroy him if he made a single sound. He hung there, watching them eat, and then the world exploded into pain.

And that was too much. His determined defiance wilted as his mind lost its focus, and he screamed. It was a primal scream, a scream of a mindless animal in absolute agony, and had it been heard beyond the walls of the prison, it would have given children nightmares and sent respectable women racing for the safety of their homes.

The pain eased, leaving him trembling and totally delirious. He drifted in his own world, a world of shadows and strange shapes, of strange whispers and both pain and fear. Pain from a tortured body, pain from a starving stomach, and fear of what that emptiness inside him meant, though he had lost too much rationality to understand why it made him so afraid. It was reflexive, innate, subconscious, that fear, and that fear overwhelmed all others.

Then, there was respite. Something cool and wet touched his lips, and he responded by instinct, taking in the blessed wetness and swallowing it. It was like nectar from the gods, and the liquid eased the mind-consuming pain within him, seemed to take the pain away, and made him feel...good. He felt better, but still weak, still felt the pain behind that sensation, but he felt like the pain just...didn't matter.

A voice drifted within his haze, a voice he did not know. *"What is your name?"*

"Kyven...Steelhammer," he whispered in reply. He saw no reason why he should not respond to the voice. It was *something*, something other than pain or fear, something that gave his mind a new stimulus to which to respond.

"You are the same Kyven Steelhammer from Atan?"

"Yes."

There seemed to be a...pause. He swam in his delusion for what seemed like long moments before the voice whispered to him again.

"How were you helping the black fox Shaman?"

"I...am...the black fox," he whispered feverishly. "It's...my disguise."

A startled silence. *"You are a Shaman?"*

"I...was. No eyes...no eyes...."

"A Shaman? You're a Shaman?"

He couldn't understand why the voice was so insistent. "Yes," he reaffirmed.

"A human Shaman?"

"The...first," he breathed, then he coughed, which weakened him considerably. "The...first of...those...to come."

"Who sent you to Avannar?"

"Haven."

"What is Haven?"

"Haven."

"Again, what is Haven?"

"Arcans," he whispered, his head drooping even lower. "Arcans."

"They're part of the Masked?"

"The...Masked is...part of...them."

There was another silence. *"You mean Arcans run the Masked, and not humans?"*

"Yes. Haven commands...Masked obey."

"Where are the leaders of Haven?"

"Far," he mumbled. "Far."

"Where exactly?"

"Far," he repeated. "Cold. Snow. Far."

"What city do they hide in?"

"Haven," he answered. "Capitol...Arcan nation. Haven."

There was a *long* silence, so much so that Kyven thought the comforting voice that was giving him a reason to focus on something other

than the pain had left him.

“You mean to say that there is a nation of Arcans?” came the whisper in his mind, incredulous.

“Cities. Villages. Many,” he whispered disjointedly. “Far. Cold. Snow.”

There was another lengthy time where he floated alone in his shadowy world, and then the voice touched him once again. *“What is your purpose here, Kyven Steelhammer?”*

“Learn. Watch. Warn,” he answered. “Share.”

“And what did you learn?”

“Loremasters...lie. Crystals...gone. Loreguard. Atan. Mines. Take. War...coming. Warn. Flaur believes. Flaur...fighting...Loremasters. Mountains...blood. War. Noraam. War.”

“War with who?”

“Everyone. All Noraam...war...coming. Crystals...gone. Noraam...fight. Mines. Mountains...blood.

“Flaur intends to go to war with the Loremasters?”

“Yes. Loremasters...lie. No...crystals. Flaur...warns...others. Alliance...dissolved. War. Everywhere. Everyone. Mountains...blood. Mines. War.”

“So, this Haven is trying to dissolve the Noraavi alliance and get the kingdoms to fight each other?”

“No. War...coming. Humans...war...each other. Crystals...gone. Mines. Fight over mines. Mountains...blood. Haven...save Arcans. Arcans...die...humans...fight. Arcans...killed. No crystals...collars. Save Arcans.”

“So Haven is trying to free the Arcans?”

“Bought...Arcans. Bought. Haven...send Masked...buy. Crystals. Bring...crystals. Buy...Arcans. Legal. Take...Arcans...crystals...last longer. Collars. Crystals...for Arcans. Helps...Arcans. Helps...humans.”

“This Haven has its own crystals? Where do they mine them? What deposits have they found?”

“Shaman...make.”

There was a startled silence. “*Shaman can make crystals?*” came a stunned question.

“Spirits...mana...same. Energy...spirits...energy...crystals. Magic. Same. Shaman....crystals...same. Shaman...drain. Shaman...make. Crystals...same...Shaman. Shaman...make...crystals. Masked...use. Buy Arcans.”

“So you’re telling me that you can make crystals?”

“Me...no. Weak. Guile...deceit. Tricks. Spy. Crystals...too weak. Shaman...make. Not me. Too weak.”

He was starting to feel quite peculiar, and the pain was starting to push away his sense of strange contentment. He could hear the voice, that whispering voice, but it was as if, now, it had no meaning. It joined other voices, other whispers, other murmurs in his head, descended into the cacophony of his shadowy, delusional world.

He heard it, but it meant nothing to him. *“The drug is wearing off, and he’s no longer in a lucid state. We have to let him rest.”*

“Give him another dose.”

“You don’t understand how this drug works, Major. It has what you might call diminishing returns, because his body builds a tolerance to it every time it’s used. To get him into a lucid state where he’ll answer questions, we’ll have to give him a larger dose. If we do give him another dose right now, it will kill him. This drug puts stress on the heart, and I don’t think his heart can take that kind of strain right now given he’s been

weakened by torture and dehydration and his heart is already stressed from the first dose. No, his pulse is racing like a frightened rabbit. Another dose would be fatal."

"That's unacceptable."

"It's our only option, Major. He already proved he can resist torture, so you're not going to get anything out of him unless he's drugged, and these drugs have limits. No dominator or hypnotizer will work on him because of that hood, and I seriously doubt you want to remove that hood right now. No Shaman ever caught has lived more than an hour after taking out his eyes. If he really is a Shaman, then maybe the fact that we didn't take out his eyes is the only reason he's still alive...but do you really want to take that hood off of him while he still has his eyes? He won't get out of this room alive, but he'll sure as hell kill everyone in it before he goes."

"How long do we have to wait?"

"Two hours. I suggest giving him some water or broth to build up his strength as well, or the next dose will kill him. He's so weak now, I'm honestly shocked he's not dead."

"Do it, Sergeant. Water him, and we'll continue this in two hours."

There was a long period of shadowy drifting, and then a voice seemed to rise up from the fog. *"I can't fuckin' believe it, a human Shaman,"* the voice growled in a rough voice. *"Father-damned traitor to your own race is what you are, you sack a' shit. I'll give you water, alright, but by fuckin' grace, you're gonna scream for it."*

And the world exploded in pain.

The pain scoured everything away, everything but a pair of eyes, green and glowing with an unwavering light, staring at him through the darkness of eternity, exploding through the white light popping in his skull from the agony being inflicted on him. The darkness around the eyes swallowed the light, and swallowed the pain, leaving him numb, leaving him unfeeling, leaving him in a state he imagined death would feel.

The eyes simply regarded him emotionlessly, coming no closer, but keeping the pain away, shielding him with the comforting darkness of shadow. The shadow kept the pain away, shadow that seemed to comfort him, shadow that could stand no longer the torment of something that was part of itself and had rose up of its own volition to defend. It shielded him now, protected him from the pain, left him with nothing...but at least the pain had been shunted away, blocked.

There was no more pain, and there was nothing more to fear. He was dying. He knew that now. He was dying, and he would go to his grave without giving them the satisfaction of even making him scream. But he would make one more sound before it happened. He looked into those eyes, steady and unmoved, and *yearned* for them and the release they represented. She had abandoned him, but he still belonged to her. She had come for what was hers. "Did I do well?" he asked in a bare whisper.

"That remains to be seen, my Shaman," came the answer, an answer that filled him with a pride that even staved off the burning of his thirst and the emptiness of his hunger. *"Let me show you something."*

In a flash, he was no longer in his shifting, private world of ghosts and shadows and voices. He was no longer hungry. He was no longer thirsty. He merely...*was*. He was beside his spirit, and they were moving, even though they were both motionless. Hills and forests blurred by, until he was looking down at a plantation, a tobacco plantation that covered two very low, gentle hills between which a small river flowed. Below him, dozens of Arcans labored in the fields under the watchful eye of a single human carrying a black rod, sitting astride a horse. The Arcans were collared, most of them were naked, and they worked in silence with their heads down

"Where are we?" he asked in a voice that was strong and steady. He looked down and saw that he was nude, but he was whole and unharmed. The hunger was gone, the thirst was gone, the pain was gone. All there was left in him was a peculiar kind of weariness, an exhaustion of a man who had walked the length of Noraam without a single moment's rest. Though he felt weary, he also felt like he could go on for a while longer. He wasn't

ready to rest yet...and he seemed to sense that if he rested, his spirit would take him, and he would be dead.

“What do you see?” came the answer.

“I see a plantation,” he answered, looking down from their hovering viewpoint. “It looks like the piedmonts south of Riyan.”

“What do you see?”

He looked again. “I see...Arcans. Working the fields. There’s a man on a horse watching over them.”

“What do you see?”

He looked closer, and that act almost seemed to put him right in the fields among the Arcans. They worked quietly, hands moving among the tobacco stalks picking off insects, pulling up weeds. He looked at a young canine, a brown bristly-furred canine with a nick out of his left ear, and he saw what he had seen in so many Arcans before this one. This one had nothing left in him. The hope, the joy of life, it was gone. The Arcan had been beaten into submission, and now he was nothing but a slave.

“I see despair,” he answered after a long moment, looking from Arcan to Arcan. “These Arcans have lost all hope.”

“What do you see?”

He looked closer at an older feline, one that vaguely reminded him of Stripes. Is this what could have happened to Stripes had she not had the luck of being bought by Clet’s parents? Could Patches be working in this field, or Lightfoot, or Tweak? Was this the fate that awaited the Arcans, to become the slaves the humans made them to be? That almost filled him with despair himself, the thought of beautiful, timid little Patches, so meek and yet so strong, who had endured unspeakable abuse and yet had the strength in her to be her own woman, had the courage to go back into human lands to help her friend, her dear friend, in his dangerous mission. She was on the run now, watched over by Lightfoot and being smuggled to

Atan by Shario, who would fulfill his final promise to Kyven and save his beloved Arcan companions. He knew Shario would. Shario was a man of honor, and a man which made Kyven feel honored to consider a friend.

“I see...I see a wrong that must be set right,” he declared.

“What do you see?”

He hesitated a moment. He knew the answer, but he also understood that to answer that question was to deny the release from the pain he so desperately wanted, and he could sense that in this decision, the spirit would not sway him one way or the other. Two paths split at a fork in the road before him. One was short, but ended in contentment. The other was long and difficult, and ended at the same contentment. He could take either path and arrive at the same destination, and would be welcomed by those at that destination with equal joy and welcome no matter which path he took.

One path was death. The other path was life.

Which path would he choose? There was more to them than that simple idea. If he chose death, he would die hanging from those chains, die and go on to whatever reward the fox felt him worthy, for she owned him, body and soul. But if he chose life, he was returning to the pain, to the horror and the terror of the hunger, but he was also returning to try to make a difference. He had achieved his little victory, but if he chose life, he could maybe achieve a few more little victories.

Maybe...he could make a difference.

But he already knew the answer. And to accept that answer was to accept a fundamental truth about himself that he had played at, but had never faced in earnest.

He could not deny it. He was a *Shaman* now, and he would honor the path he had chosen for himself by *being* a Shaman in heart, body, mind, and soul. He had believed that by mimicking Clover, he could be a true Shaman, but now he understood that every Shaman was different, that there was no *one way* to be a Shaman. Clover had her way, he would have his...and

neither of them would be any less a Shaman. That they served the spirits, served the Arcans, and even served the humans, that was all that mattered. That was their purpose.

That was his purpose.

He had known that truth, but in that moment, he *understood* it, deep inside himself. Like a door opening in his soul, he understood what it meant to be a Shaman, understood in a way far beyond mere words.

He, Kyven Steelhammer, was a *Shaman*.

He chose his path.

“I see that I am *needed*.”

He felt...acceptance. She was pleased by his decision, but would have thought no less of him for choosing the other path. After suffering so much, she would have accepted it if he chose to end his pain. *“Remember this place, my Shaman, for you are needed here. This is where your Walk will end, and you begin the path of a true Shaman. This is where you will begin. This is where you will begin. This is where you will begin. This is where you will begin.”*

“This is where you will begin....”

The plantation shuddered around him, then it dissolved into darkness, then that darkness shattered like a thousand mirrors and was consumed by the light. And with that light came pain. A world exploded into pain.

But there was more than pain. As the pain stick was removed and rational thought returned to him, he realized that there was *more* there than there had been.

The fox had taught him the second of the three spells she said he ever had need to know.

That simple act told him everything. It told him that they had *not* taken his eyes. The device over his face had to shut his eyes down in a way that

made it impossible for him to use his magic, since his eyes were his window into the spirit world, and therefore the focus of his power. He was also keenly aware of every shadow around him, he could sense every single one of them, sense how deep they were, their shapes, and could sense the *energy* within them in a way he had only felt when he was an Arcan. As unbelievable as that seemed, he knew what it meant. Somehow, some way, the fox had restored him to humanity, but she *did not take his shadow powers*. She left them within him, and only now, in this moment of clarity, did he understand the truth.

The truth within the truth, within the lie. Which was itself within a deeper truth.

Guile and deceit.

He understood that he had had a vision, incited by a moment of near-death, but that didn't make it any less real or true. His spirit had communicated with him in that vision, and now he understood.

He understood.

All of this, it had been a *test*. She had tested his devotion, tested his determination, and tested his loyalty.

And he passed.

He understood that the fox did want him to reveal certain truths to the Loremasters. He knew that he had said...something. He couldn't clearly remember, only knew that he had heard a voice, and had responded to it while in some kind of haze. He had no idea what he'd told the Loremasters, but something told him that he said *exactly* what his spirit wanted them to hear. She was playing her own game in this, a game separate from the other spirits, and Kyven was the primary piece on her board. He had served his purpose, and now she was moving him elsewhere, to begin the game again.

For some reason, she felt his time in Avannar was complete, and though he could certainly serve Haven by remaining in the city to feed them information, the fox had decided to use him in some other manner. But

before he left, she wanted certain truths revealed, truths which would be highly effective in turning the Loremasters on their ears and sending them in a panic. He had no idea what he told the Loremasters, but given what he knew, he was certain that any *one* of his deeper secrets would cause the Loremasters to go into hysterics.

To use that spell, he needed his eyes and he needed to be in contact with his victim. That wouldn't be that hard, because he could sense the crystal in the device over his upper face, and he was absolutely sure he could drain it even without his eyes. And he'd be in contact with his victim the next time he jabbed him with that pain stick. The alchemical device would serve as a bridge, for it was a conductor of magical energy. All he had to do was open himself to the *energy* within the pain stick, and the crystal inside would get drained the instant it made contact with him. It wouldn't be instant, but the pain stick wouldn't *function* while he was draining it, which would protect him from its pain-giving purpose.

He was starved, dehydrated, injured, exhausted, and disoriented, but he knew it was time to act.

He focused his attention on feeling the magic around him. He could feel the crystal on the device over his face, and could sense the crystal of the pain stick close to him, as well as a few other crystals. The sergeant was loaded with alchemical devices, he could assense them. From the sense of the shadow under him, Kyven could detect that he was close, within reach of the pain stick. He had recoiled, watching Kyven carefully, no doubt having heard him make a sound, and would most likely hit him again to make him scream.

First things first. He focused his attention on the crystal and the device over his face, sensing the magic within them, the power of the spirits trapped in the mortal world. He opened himself to that power completely, and that act caused the crystal within the device to discharge all of its power into Kyven through the alchemical device which was specifically built to channel magic. Kyven absorbed that power and immediately turned it on himself in a blessing, a blessing that would cause him to recover quickly

from his wounds and exhaustion after he rested. Such a blessing would remain within him until it was activated, so that ensured that he would recover much faster than if he let nature take its course.

The instant the crystal was drained, the device over his face ceased functioning. Light assaulted his eyes, and his eyelids and eyes suddenly worked again, no longer paralyzed and rendered useless by the device which had been placed over them. His eyes worked again, and delving the device told him that it had been made to render the wearer blind and deaf when the user so desired. It was a clever device, no doubt designed to use against a Shaman in how it rendered one sightless, by completely disabling the eyes. The problem was, the Loremasters believed that a Shaman was powerless without his eyes, but that wasn't entirely true. Crystals had the same power within them, and with a crystal to serve as the source of magic, a Shaman could utilize blessings, which *did not* require him to be able to see, and thus didn't require that he even have eyes to use. That was why he had been surprised when they used an alchemical device to torture him rather than use mundane means. They obviously felt that with that device on his head, he was powerless.

Back to the drawing board for them. But he had to admit, it was a very clever idea that *almost* worked.

He opened his eyes to the spirits, and opened his eyes, the glow all but concealed behind the wire mesh over his eyes. The metal mesh over his face didn't exist to spirit sight, so he saw right through it and saw that he was in a medium sized room holding only the one man. Behind him there was a large table behind which there were several chairs, and from the pattern of tiny life and also the crystals within them, he saw that there were several small objects and two alchemical devices on that table. Clearly they believed he was absolutely no threat, for the man was alone, alone with him in the room. No other observers, not even guards. That was...that was just *stupid*. The man was wearing three devices in addition to the pain stick in his hand, a talker, a shockrod, and a small device hanging by a chain around his neck. He watched a moment as Kyven's head wilted, then he reared back with the pain stick, and pushed it forward--

Kyven struck the instant the pain stick touched him. The crystal in the pain stick suddenly had an unimpeded path for its power to return to the spirit world, which caused the stick to cease to function as its power bled away from a different path. Even as he drained the pain stick, he imagined the spell the fox had taught him and then unleashed it against the unwary man.

He didn't even get the chance to scream. Kyven would never be strong enough to heal, but what the fox taught him was a spell that wasn't quite healing, but would help him now. It was a vampiric attack, as Kyven drained away the very life energy of his victim, life energy that would revitalize him enough to be able to move and function for a short time. He would still be starved and dehydrated, but the borrowed strength would be enough for him to operate for a good half an hour before it drained away, giving him a good, solid chance to effect his escape. Energy flowed into him, through him, surging into a weakened heart and causing it to beat with strength and certainly, flowed through muscles that had been slowly eroding away and gave them renewed vitality. The strength and energy did nothing for his raw wrists or dislocated shoulder, but it did give him the sudden strength to pull against his chains and take the stress off his shoulders, even as the man, paralyzed by the spell and his eyes wild, began to degrade. His skin took a grayish pall, and his muscles seemed to wilt and wither as the energy was drained from him. As Kyven grew stronger, the man grew weaker, until he was no longer strong enough to hold the pain stick or stand. He broke the contact, which ended the spell, but by then it was too late. He collapsed to the ground, too weak to move, too weak to cry out, his eyes the only thing that could move...until they rolled back in his head and he passed out

He wasn't dead, but it would take him *weeks* to recover what Kyven took from him. But, Kyven knew he could *kill* with that spell, if he kept contact long enough to drain away every iota of life energy within his victim. The fox would not grant him the black energy of death magic that could kill instantly, but she had no qualms teaching him spells that killed as secondary effect, like his cold and his lightning. The spells themselves

weren't killing, it was the effects they created that caused death...just indirectly. A small difference, but it made all the difference in the world when once compared black crystal energy to other energies.

He knew he didn't have much time. The energy he stole would only last a short time, a short time he had to get out of wherever he was and get somewhere safe. He turned his attention to himself, and then called forth the energy of the shadow. He felt it fill him, move through him, infuse him, and then he felt it settle into him. His body again took on that shadowy form, and that shadow he could manipulate. It was a simple matter to make his feet thin enough to slip through the manacles on his ankles, then he did the same to his hands. He slipped free of his chains, the foot chains clinking to the stone floor as he dropped lightly beside the man, using his command of his shadow form to even put his shoulder back in its socket, and doing it painlessly while his body was malleable and open to such manipulation. He felt no pain, felt strong and healthy, but he knew that underneath that false feeling he was still injured and weakened, and his good feeling would last only as long as the stolen strength within him lasted.

He didn't have time to think about this or plan it. All he had time to do was step out that door and wing it for everything he was worth, because he still had not learned how to move through the shadows, and his false sense of strength and vitality was only an illusion. In his condition, he couldn't risk trying. He would get out in a way suitable for a Shaman of the shadow fox; he would put on an illusion, walk out that door, and use every lie, trick, and deception he knew to talk his way out of this prison and to freedom.

He did have one sense of poetic justice. He wasted the time and energy to strip and search the wasted form of the grizzled, sadistic sergeant, found the key to his manacles and his cell on his body, and then put the sergeant in the manacles in his place. The man's uniform wouldn't fit him, so he used it to clean all the blood off his arms and feet so as to prevent any physical evidence give him away if he was touched. He then took all the man's alchemical devices, threw his now bloodstained uniform on the table but belted on his belt holding his pistol, shockrod, and his money, put the circular pendant device around his neck just as the sergeant had worn it, and

he also decided to keep the wire mesh device that robbed him of the use of his eyes. That might be useful, but it would also be good to give it to a friendly alchemist and have them study it. He then wrapped himself in an illusion of the sergeant before Kyven attacked him, perfect in every detail. After it was done, he picked up the depleted pain stick, took out the man's keys, went out, and locked the door.

Beyond the door was a long, narrow corridor devoid of any windows. It had only one door, and that was the door to his cell, and then a fifty rod walk to where a pair of guards stood flanking a dark stairway leading up. It was a curious setup, but given what kind of security risk Kyven was, it made sense to put him in a place where the only way out was down a long corridor with no other way to go, and two guards that would see him coming. Kyven stumped down the hall in a way that mimicked what he heard of the man's walk, and it seemed to be enough to convince the two men that he was who they thought he was.

"Be right back," Kyven said in the man's own voice. "Privy."

They let him go by without challenge.

The stairs came up to another level, more what Kyven expected a prison would appear. It was a large open chamber filled with cages built into the middle, open-air cells that held men. Cell doors were also in the walls on each wall of the rectangular chamber's long sides, and there was another set of stairs at the other end of the long room. The men in the open cells were all naked, dirty, bedraggled, and looked weary. Most of them had beards, and the longer their beards, the thinner and more emaciated they appeared. The place smelled awful. There were guards at the stairs on the far end, but there were also two patrols of single roving guards that seemed to walk the path around the center cages, patrolling the chamber. The chamber was lit by a series of alchemical lamps affixed to the ceiling, high and far out of reach of anyone without a ladder.

Kyven realized he was in the Black Keep, the notorious island prison just upriver from the Loremaster headquarters. A room like this wouldn't

exist in the Loremaster headquarters, and they would not take him anywhere else but the Black Keep if they took him out of that building.

He took stock. The look of this place was that it was underground, one of the dungeons under the keep, so he had to go up to the ground floor and then find his way outside. Once outside, he had to get on a boat; there were no bridges to the Black Keep. That gave the guards at least three solid chokepoints where he would have to talk or trick his way past them. Once at the door to the keep, once more at the gate through the wall surrounding it, then a third time at the boat dock as he tried to get to the mainland. The sergeant probably had no orders to leave the island, so the problem would come at the wall gate and the boat dock. He could probably talk his way out of the front door just by professing a desire for a little fresh air.

Well, no reason to dally. He set off down the length of the room, nodding to the single guard that was patrolling the rectangular hallway created by the cages in the middle and the wall. The guard nodded back, but did not challenge him. He wasn't challenged by the guards at the far stairs either, and mounted them and went up a straight stair that opened into yet another hallway. This looked vaguely familiar, a long wide passage with a set of open bar cells one side, showing that each cell held four men, and no furniture, just blankets laid out on the floor and a bucket to serve as a chamber pot. Catwalks on the upper walls above had doors, forming a stack of sorts of cells on only one side of the block, with stairs on the far side, near a closed and barred door. It looked very similar to the kennel in which he'd been kept in Cheston. Kyven passed two patrolling guards on the way to that closed door, and as he approached, he inspected it. It was a iron bar door, open from top to bottom, and two men stood guard just on the other side of it. He saw no way to open it from his side, which meant that the men beyond had to open the door for him, but he did see that it had an alchemical device inside it, which formed part of its lock. He stumped up to the door and stood there, but the two men just looked at him lazily. "Well?" he finally growled in the sergeant's voice.

"Well what, Sergeant?" one of them asked.

“You gonna make me wait all day or you gonna open the door?” Kyven demanded.

The men laughed. “I never knew a sergeant’s stripes entitled a man to be treated like a general,” the shorter of the two men said, who also had sergeant’s stripes on his uniform.

Clearly, they expected him to open the door, but he had no key, and all there was on this side of the door was a keyslot.

Wait. The keyslot was thin, and it was just an etched depression in the door. The shape of it and the fact that it was alchemical made it pretty clear what he had to do. He took the little medallion off his neck and fitted the edge of it into that depression, and found it fit perfectly. He turned it, and then the door unlocked and retracted into the wall of its own volition. “Anything else, your Majesty?” the other sergeant asked teasingly.

“I need a drink. I’m feeling a bit drained,” Kyven growled as he stumped past them. Beyond them was a short corridor with another door, and that door had a more normal door beyond it that should open to the outside, or to another part of the prison. He fitted his key to the next door, and it too opened to the key.

Not a single man challenged him as he made his way through the prison. That heavy door did not lead outside, it was more of a division between major sections of the prison. Kyven moved from section to section at a steady pace, through different cellblocks, saying nothing to any man, but always moving as if he knew exactly where he was going even though he had no idea. He was just moving from major doorway to major doorway, knowing that eventually he would either find a window or a door that would lead outside. He spent so much time walking that he started to feel the passage of time, and he knew that the strength he stole from the sergeant wasn’t going to hold out forever. He had to find his way out, and find it quickly, then get himself someplace safe and hole up until he had a chance to recover.

But his luck did pay off, for he reached what seemed a major node of the keep, where there were doors on three walls that led to cell blocks, and a fourth that opened directly to the outside. He made his way to that door quickly, using his key to open it, and stepped out into a paved courtyard that had a huge set of gates at the far end, gates which were closed and guarded. There were a few guards out in the courtyard, and there was a table and chairs off to one side where a few guards sat and rested, probably taking a break. This courtyard was a staging area for the guards on top of being the main way into the prison. It was late afternoon, very nearly sunset, windy, and the sky was heavily laden with clouds that threatened rain, and that determined just what kind of angle Kyven would use to try to talk his way off the island.

He knew he had to do it, so he wasted no time. He stumped up to that main gate, and a guard on the far side regarded him. "Did the major leave?" he asked.

"Which one?"

"The one that's been coming in with me, blockhead," Kyven growled.

The guard frowned. "I don't know. I can check."

"Do it, cause I need to talk to him, and I can't find him anywhere," Kyven said bluntly.

"He's not answering his talker?"

"If he was answering his talker, would I be looking for him?" Kyven asked acidly. "That's why I'm out here seeing if he left!"

The guards checked several logs, then he came back. "He left half an hour ago," he answered.

"Then let me out, I have to go get him," Kyven said.

"Why don't you just call him in?"

Kyven had the illusion give the man a flat look. “And just how do I do that when he ain’t answerin’ his talker?” he asked.

“Oh. Right,” the man said with a rueful chuckle.

Kyven stood there and watched with building anxiety as the guard opened the gate for him. The large gate swung open ponderously, and Kyven stalked through it and down the well-defined paved path that led down to the docks. He kept his elation in check as he marched down to the docks, and without so much as a word, stumped into the small boat and sat down as a young man started untying it from the wharf. The young man took hold of the tiller, and the boat, powered by alchemy, started across the river of its own volition. The young man aimed them at a guarded quay that jutted out into the river, and the trip only took a few minutes. The entire time, however, Kyven was carefully measuring how he felt and how it deteriorated, and estimated he only had about twenty more minutes before he was all but debilitated by his exhaustion and injuries. He had to find a place where he could rest and recover, but it couldn’t be anywhere even remotely connected to Kyven Steelhammer. That meant that he had to avoid Shario and his friends, and go somewhere where he could hide when they started searching for him...and they *would* search for him. They would seal Avannar off and search the entire city from one end to the other until they found him, and he knew it. He needed to escape, but that would do him no good after his borrowed strength ebbed and he was helpless. No, he needed to *eat*, and he needed to do it right now. Food and water would work with the blessing he put on himself to help him recover quickly, so he wouldn’t be helpless for long after his borrowed strength faded.

He knew where he could go.

As soon as the boat reached the far side, he climbed out and stumped up the quay, saying not a single word to any man. He turned on River Street towards the Loremaster headquarters, which was only a couple of blocks up, but he turned off the street and into a narrow alley as soon as he was out of convenient sight of the guards at the quay. He changed his illusion to that of a well-dressed man with short, well groomed blond hair, wearing a clean,

new gray waistcoat over a linen shirt and a pair of elegant black breeches. Once he had his illusion settled, he hurried to an inn he had visited once before, the inn where he'd stayed when the fox had sent him here after parting with Stalker.

The place was exactly as he remembered it, as was the marten at the door and the well-dressed proprietor. He wasn't playing chess this time, he was standing near a table holding men dressed in finery and smoking cigars, and he shook Kyven's hand as he entered the common room and was seated at a table by the marten. "Nice to meet you, my friend. What may my fine kitchen make for you?"

"Anything that's ready, my good gentleman," Kyven answered. "And a lot of it. I'm quite hungry."

"I have a sumptuous beef and vegetable stew simmering as we speak, sir."

"Stew it is. And some bread and some potatoes, fresh milk if you have it along with some fine ale and a pitcher of water, and be sure to make the plate heavy." Kyven handed the man a 25 chit coin.

"I'll have it brought to you at once," he said with a smile.

A slender little raccoon female came out quickly, loaded down with a tray meant for him. On that tray was two bowls of stew, milk, a bowl of sliced potatoes in a beef broth, a tankard of hearty ale, and a small decanter pitcher filled with water. Kyven felt his strength ebbing as the raccoon placed his meal before him, and his hands were shaking under the illusion as the cute little raccoon serving girl set things down one at a time. The smell of it almost made him tear it out of her hands, and it was a supreme act of willpower to allow her to set it on the table. "Will there be anything else, good Master?" the raccoon asked.

"No thank you. This smells heavenly."

"We have very good cooks here, good Master. If you need anything else, just wave and I'll come serve you."

As soon as she left, he wanted to ravenously attack the meal...but he couldn't do that. If he tore into the meal like a starving man here in the common room in front of everyone, it might make people curious, and Kyven didn't want to stand out. So he took his time, almost torturing himself as he first poured a glass of water with a trembling hand and started drinking slowly. His stomach heaved when the water hit it, so he took small sips, letting his stomach adjust little by little. After he'd drank about half the glass, he set it down and took up his spoon and a slice of warm dark bread and started eating very slowly, both so it didn't look unusual to the other customers and also to allow his stomach to accept the food so soon after the water without him throwing it back up. He ate the large bowl of stew and all the bread, and drank almost all of the pitcher of water, eating steadily but not too fast so as not to make himself sick. Then he ate the potatoes, drank the broth, finished off the water, then leaned back and nursed his tankard of ale...not for the alcohol, but because a good ale was actually good for a recovering body. He could almost feel the food working with the blessing he had placed on himself, and under his borrowed strength, which was starting to ebb, he could feel that his body was recovering. He would still be weak, and he'd have to be careful, but he felt confident he could sustain his illusion. After he felt so full he could barely move and enjoyed a few precious moments of rest and recovery, he used the privy which was just off the common room and dispelled shockingly dark yellow urine from himself.

When he returned to the common room, he saw a large number of Loreguard at the entrance, and the proprietor standing there talking to them. Kyven knew that they'd discovered he had escaped, but they didn't want to raise an alarm. But he also didn't want to use that door, nor appear even remotely human right now. They were going to stop every man they could find and make sure it wasn't Kyven, so he needed to look very much unlike himself right now.

He wrapped himself in an illusion of the raccoon serving female as soon as he was out of the common room, using the passage that went from

the common room out to the stableyard behind the inn. He stepped out into the stableyard and moved to the horse gate without hesitation.

“Dancer, what are you doing out there? You know you’re still on duty!” came a quiet call. Kyven looked towards the dorm, and saw a young male raccoon looking through a small window from his room.

Kyven didn’t answer. What he *did* do was allow the illusion’s eyes to suddenly glow with a steady emerald light, and the illusion put a finger before its muzzle with a slightly mischievous expression.

The raccoon’s eyes widened, and he nodded vigorously. “Will you bless me?” he called in a bare whisper.

He couldn’t resist. He came over to the window and reached in, putting his hand on the raccoon’s shoulder. “May the spirits bless you, and watch over you, and bring you happiness,” he said in his own voice, which made the young male’s eyes go wild.

And for the first time, he truly *meant* it.

“I was never here.”

“You were never here,” the raccoon affirmed, putting his hands on Kyven’s wrist and forearms with an adoring expression. His eyes widened even more when he felt no fur under his pads, just skin. Human skin, and raw open wounds left over from the manacles. The hand that recoiled from his wrist had a little blood on the pad from his open wounds.

He just put his finger to his lips again, his eyes playful.

“To my grave, Shaman. To my grave.”

He let himself out of the stable gate, and as soon as he was in an alley, he again changed his illusion. He was now a Loreguard officer, a Captain, who looked ruggedly handsome with graying black hair, salt-and-pepper, and walked with a slight limp, the illusion patterned on a real Loreguard officer whose name Kyven did not know, but whom Kyven had seen. He came back out to River Street and moved towards the quay used by boats

running to the Black Keep along a street that was now empty of anything but Loreguard, for the sun had set, the streets were darkening and the sky threatened to unleash its rain at any moment, and curfew was still in effect.

This was the gamble. The last thing they would *ever* expect is for him to go *back* to the Black Keep. But this was his only way out.

Moving through Loreguard patrols with little trouble, Kyven limped back to the quay holding the boats to the Black Keep, just as the rain began to fall. He marched past the guards at the street, then was challenged by the guards near the boats. "I have business on the island, Corporal," he said in a calm yet authoritative voice.

"I need--nevermind," he said under Kyven's steady stare. Kyven limped past him as gracefully as he could, and settled himself in the very same boat he'd used to get off the island. The same young man untied it and started them towards the island.

The rain was a blessing. After they were about a hundred rods out from the quay, it made the shore hard to see in the rapidly descending darkness. Kyven simply sat there for a moment, gauging the visibility, then he turned in the boat and looked at the young man. "I imagine that a man who makes his living in boats would know how to swim, in case of an accident. Ever learn, my boy?" he asked curiously.

"Why, yes sir," he answered.

"Good."

Kyven reached out and put a hand on the young man's bare arm, and used the strength-stealing spell. The man seemed to jerk, but he too was paralyzed by the spell, unable to move as Kyven drained him of a portion of his strength. Kyven drained away more and more of his strength, feeling it flood him, until the man slumped, the tiller shifted, and the boat began to turn wild circles in the steady rain. Kyven ended the spell feeling once again invigorated and renewed, then pushed the young man to the floor of the boat and took his place at the tiller. He'd seen the young man use it, so

he knew that all he had to do was twist the handle to make the boat go, and the tiller would guide it. Kyven turned the boat downstream and turned the handle enough to give them a steady pace. He passed under the bridge leading to the Loremaster's island unseen, and when he was out from under it, he turned the handle to make the boat move slowly yet steadily, not so fast that its motion would draw attention through the steady rain, and he steered the boat to the very center of the river, which would make him all but invisible in the rainy night from either shore, barely moving faster than the river's current so the boat drew no attention from its motion and it left no wake that would betray the passage of the boat to those on shore.

This was the last place they'd look, because they could account for every man that had left the island except for the sergeant, whom they had seen walk off into old Avannar. That was where they would look first, and wouldn't think to cover the rivers until their hasty first search came up empty, when it became clear to them that Kyven was *not* injured, did not crawl off to the first hole he could find and try to bury himself. And it would be the hardest place for them to check, for only boats could get out here.

He moved very slowly but steadily downstream, going on the strength he stole from the young man laying unconscious in the boat's bottom, until a shadow ahead of him revealed a ship anchored as close to the center of the river as it could manage. It was a Loreguard naval vessel, and its rails were manned with sailors who were peering out into the storm with alchemical lights. Kyven released the alchemical motor and caused the boat to slow to a drift, carried only by the current so as to leave no wake whatsoever, and he covered the entire boat in an illusion that it was a piece of driftwood, a large log that might explain the very faint wake trailing out behind the boat. Covering the whole boat strained him considerably in his weakened condition, and he had to concentrate every iota of strength on it to hold it steady, so much so that his heart was pounding in his ears after only a moment. But he did not waver, did not falter, drawing on the strength he stole from the young man to give him the strength he needed to drift past the anchored boat, a process that took nearly ten agonizing minutes where

he thought of nothing but holding his illusion, and he burned up all the stolen strength he had taken from the young man. He slid past it silently, and once he was past it, as the ship vanished into the rainy night he saw the wharfs of Avannar. Those were on the edge of town. That naval vessel had been the picket searching for renegade boats...searching for him.

But he was past them.

He had escaped.

He leaned against the back of the boat, feeling weary, in pain, but strangely good. He had no stolen strength left, and it left him weak as a kitten, his wrists and ankles throbbing, his shoulder aching, and his breathing fast and a little shallow as he tried to recover...and he did recover. The blessing he has used on himself right at first was already at work, and he knew he would be if not in good shape, at least in good enough shape to travel by sunrise. He didn't know how much he'd told the Loremasters, but something told him that he said what he needed to say to further whatever plans his totem had in mind. He had faced himself, and had admitted, in his soul, *what* he was, something he had never done before. Before, he knew he was a Shaman. Now, he *understood* what that meant. He wasn't just parroting, mimicking Clover, imitating what he thought a Shaman should be. He knew who he was, he knew what he was, and he knew what he had to do.

He had a duty that he had to answer. Not because he knew it was the right thing to do, but because *he was a Shaman*, and he was needed to serve the will of the spirits, of his spirit, at that place. So she directed, so he followed. He would not be like Clover, but he would be no less a Shaman than her.

He twisted the handle on the tiller as far as it would go, and the boat surged ahead. Somewhere down this river and to the west, somewhere south of Riyan, there was a tobacco plantation situated on two gentle hills with a river between them. That was his destination. He had no idea where it was. He had no idea what he would do there, and he was too tired and weary to

dwell much upon it. He only knew that his totem had ordered him to go there, that he was *needed* there, and so he would go.

And that, he mused, had been the most important lesson of all.

Chapter 6

The young man whose boat Kyven had stolen became one of those who had no happy ending.

Simply put, Kyven could not afford to leave him alive. He regretted having to do it, but in this there could be no mistakes. If that man lived, he might guide the Loreguard to Kyven, so he couldn't be left alive.

The man and his boat were put back out into the Podac river after Kyven felt strong enough to disembark, and then he watched as the stones he piled in the boat and the hole he broke into the bottom did their work. The boat settled more and more into the water, it then started pouring over the sides, and then the boat and the man tied to it with vines sank into nearly in the exact center of the wide channel of the Podac River, more than deep enough that it would never be found.

Kyven felt an odd serenity. He was still injured, his wrists and ankles little but bloody meat and his shoulder in a great deal of pain from having been dislocated, but his blessing and the meal he had wisely eaten in Avannar had done wonders for him, leaving him strong enough to walk without dragging. He felt...sedate. Calm. Confident. He knew exactly who he was, where he was going--even if he wasn't quite sure exactly where that was--and what he was doing. He had gotten out of the boat on the west bank of the Podac river just before sunrise, probably about sixty minars from Avannar, found a nice sandy area sheltered by a deadfall, and caught a nice nap. He felt stronger when he woke up, if a bit hungry, but he was out in the wilds now, and food was not as much a problem. He had no clothes, but he had the sergeant's belt and his alchemical devices which he could use as barter when he reached a village, but until he got there it was a simple matter to use his lightning against a small stream to electrocute up a meal of raw fish.

Fishing, Shaman style.

Lucky for him, the sergeant's belt included a small dagger, and that served to clean and gut the fish. The meal staved off the hunger he so feared, and the stream slaked his thirst, and he set out through the wilds heading southwest, knowing that he would eventually reach Tobacco Road, the major thoroughfare that linked Avannar and Rallan, with Riyan in the middle between the two. Until he reached the road, however, he wanted to make progress south, get away from Avannar, so he opted for the angled approach to the road that led him through regions of untamed forest. He moved carefully on his bare feet and hurting ankles, stepping carefully so as not to impale himself on a thorn or twig, wincing every time a stick or branch grated against his raw wounds, and keeping his left arm tucked in close to keep from moving it too much.

About sunset, he stepped from the forest into a clearing, an artificial clearing. It was a remote farmstead, not too large, with fields surrounding a sturdy little house, a barn, a short, squat silo, and a chicken coop and pigpen. The barnyard had a fenced section for a few sheep and a single cow. Kyven wrapped himself in an illusion of a buckskin-clad prospector carrying a small pack with a bedroll tied to the top and picked his way through the rows of beets towards the house, and it wasn't long before someone took notice of him. "Hello the farm!" Kyven called. "Might I approach?"

"What business you have?" a man on the porch shouted back.

"I wanted to see if I could buy a new blanket and maybe a bit of food that I don't have to catch and kill!"

"Come along, but step careful," the man said, shouldering a long musket. "We don't get enough visitors 'round these parts to be particular friendly til we talk a bit."

The man was a tall, lanky man with a balding pate of blond hair and hard brown eyes. His skin was browned and leathered from the sun and wind, and his farmstead seemed to hold only him, his wife, a young lady

cousin or relative, and five kids. There were no Arcans, no other farmhands, and Kyven wondered how just eight of them ran a farm of this size. Kyven stopped at the steps of the porch and took the money purse stolen from the sergeant from his belt. "I only need a new blanket and some prepared food. I'll happily move on after I get them and camp well away from your fields."

"How much?"

"Given my need and the fact that I don't think I'll find anyone else around here, how about ten chits for the blanket and five for the food?" Kyven pulled three five chit coins from the purse, which looked to only hold fifteen chits more, and offered them to the man.

"Done and done, stranger," the balding man nodded, reaching out and taking the chits, inspecting them, then looking towards the door. "Sammy, go get a good blanket for the man. Ma, fix him up a dinner he can eat later."

"My thanks, friend. I'm looking forward to eating something I don't have to skin or gut first."

The man smiled. "Not many prospectors out this way."

"That's why I'm here," he said smoothly. "Working the streams near where they feed into the Podac. My thinking is when they slow down and when the tide backs them up, smaller crystals might bank up on the sandbars. I'm gonna work the bars from the Podac and up a good few minars and see what I come up with."

"Sounds like an odd plan."

"Well, hoping quantity makes up for the small crystals, cause I've sure had bad luck west and this here purse is starting to get a little light, so I'm willing to try something odd about now," he grunted, hefting the sergeant's money purse before tying it back to his belt. "Say, how far am I from the nearest village? I'm gonna need to restock soon."

"Fried's about half a day that way if you're walkin'," he said, pointing towards the south. "Just follow the wagon track leading out of my land,

goes right to it.”

“I may have to do that before I go back out,” he noted aloud.

A young boy brought out both a folded blanket and a small makeshift sack made by pulling up the corners of a piece of burlap that held cheese and a bit of jerked beef. “Nice, nice,” he said, unfolding the wool blanket and finding it fairly large and in good condition. “My thanks, friends. I’ll be on my way now. Good evening to you.”

“Be careful out there, traveler,” the farmer said gruffly. “And good luck prospectin’.”

Kyven took the cart track south, which wound along low, gentle hills, and found a nice clearing in which to camp for the night that was about two minars from the farm and just off the track, close enough to hear any traffic that used it but far enough back not to be seen, for it was separated from the track by a stand of oak and maple trees. He built a small fire for himself, enjoyed his meal of cheese and beef, found a stream nearby from which to get a drink, then used magic on himself. He’d found that the spell he’d used to strip water and detritus out of his fur also worked almost perfectly for cleaning his wounds quickly and painlessly. After envisioning it and beseeching the fox for the power to cast the spell, he saw all the accumulated dirt that had worked into the raw wounds on his ankles and wrists clear out of them, leaving them clean. Still open and oozing both blood and clear fluid, but clean. He then took the blanket and tore a good piece of it into narrow strips, and those he used to bandage his wounds as best he could. He settled in with what blanket he had left and almost immediately fell into a deep, recuperative sleep, with the sounds of the forest serenading him and the gentle warmth of the fire radiating against his face and side as he lay near the dwindling flames.

He awoke feeling a little stiff and tender, and also a bit...warm. A hand to his forehead warned him that he was on the verge of a fever, and he realized that his wounds must have become infected. He used the spell that cured diseases on himself, which would eradicate the infection...which he

could use on himself because it was a Blessing, a spell of healing, and all healing spells were Blessings. He hoped he got it early enough that it didn't weaken him any more than he was, but after a full day of steady food and a lack of heavy activity, he was confident that he wasn't going to suffer too greatly from the infection, that he cured it early enough.

Too bad curing diseases was the extent of his healing powers. The raw, bloody wounds on his wrists would be long to heal and would heal back badly scarred, but the ones on his ankles wouldn't be quite as bad. His wrists had taken the brunt of it, days and days of him hanging at that awkward angle that put all his weight on where his wrists had been in the shackles, and had put enough stress on his shoulders to cause his left one to dislocate of its own volition.

He reached the small, rural, isolated village of Fried about noon on a hot, muggy summer day, and was careful to wrap himself in his blond-haired illusion before coming out into the open...but he had to work carefully here so as to not cause problems with his illusion, so he was careful not to add any clothes to his illusion. He instead tied the remains of his blanket around himself like a kilt and put the belt on over it. He attracted quite a bit of attention as he walked in, as kids stopped to look at him and women watched him go by from their porches or gardens, and there were quite a few giggles and pointed fingers. There were a few Arcans here as well, all of them in collars, but he paid them no special attention. He could tell the general store from the surrounding buildings because of its size and the fact that four men were sitting on stools on the porch, deep in conversation. They all stopped as Kyven came up, but one man did nod to him and open the door for him when he reached it. All four were smiling.

Within was a typical village general store, for it had a little bit of just about everything. Farm equipment, supplies, food, sundries, even clothes. A general store was the sole supplier of most of the needs of its village, and so they were usually well stocked with almost anything the customers might need. This store was being minded by a young, surprisingly pretty girl with long, slightly wavy hair tied back in a single tail, sweeping the floor near the counter, wearing a simple country dress of blue cotton with white bands

on the ends of the short sleeves, the edge of the bodice where it buttoned down, and the hem of the skirt. It was a dress made to deal with the muggy summers of the region. “Can I help you, sir?” she asked with a gentle smile, obviously trying not to laugh or let her eyes wander from his face.

“Yes ma’am,” he said. “As you can probably tell, I’ve had a pretty bad run of luck and lost all my clothes and most of my gear. So, I need two good sets of clothes, a pack, a bedroll, a couple of waterskins, an extra blanket, a pair of boots, and maybe a small tent or a good sized tarp if you have one. I only have fifteen chits, but I’m willing to trade this shockrod for what I need.” He removed the shockrod from the holster and offered it to her.

She took it from him and rather expertly checked to make sure it had a crystal, then she activated it. The faint hum it gave off satisfied her, and she nodded. “What happened to you, sir?”

“Remember that storm a couple of days ago?”

She nodded.

“Well, it was a lot worse up north a ways, and I made the bad move of camping by a small stream that channeled a flash flood right on top of me. It washed out my camp, when I had my last set of good clothes off to wash them. I lost everything. Tent, clothes, gear, even my boots,” he said, holding up a bare foot and wiggling his toes. “Only things I found were this blanket and my belt. Everything else is probably halfway to the Angry Sea by now.”

“Terrible luck, sir,” she said with a nod. “I think the shockrod will cover most of what you want. I’ll have to have my pa set a value. Pa!” she called.

When a tall, heavy-set man with small eyes came out from the back room, he laughed openly at Kyven’s appearance. Kyven just chuckled ruefully and accepted it with a smile. The man introduced himself as Vern Millerson, but his amusement at Kyven’s appearance turned into a

compassionate nod when Kyven repeated his story. “So, you think the shockrod will cover what I need?” he asked.

The man held it up and inspected it, then his eyes widened. “This is a *Loreguard* shockrod. Where did you get it?”

“It is? Wow,” Kyven said with feigned surprise. “I’ve had it for over a year. Bought it in Balton in an alchemist shop. No Loreguard’s ever said a thing about me carrying it, even when I went through Avannar last fall.”

“Well, we don’t see them here often enough for it to matter to me,” he said with a smile. “I’ll trade you the shockrod for everything you want except the tent.”

“How about a piece of tarp I can use to make a lean-to instead?”

“Now that’s a deal,” he said, taking the shockrod and putting it under the counter. “Go ahead and help him gear up, Linny.”

“Okay, pa,” she nodded in reply.

With the girl Linny’s help, Kyven geared up. He picked a nice pair of denim trousers and a short-sleeved brown shirt, a rugged leather vest to wear over it and protect it, underclothes, and they had a nice pair of soft moccasin-boots that were a perfect fit. He wanted clothes for one simple reason, so he could get around without using illusions if necessary...and walking naked through the forest wasn’t entirely pleasant. Branches, thorns, and brambles had a habit of poking a man in some pretty sensitive areas. He got a second set of clothes, a roomy backpack, a bedroll, a sturdy wool blanket, two waterskins, and a length of rope and some leather thongs and a few pieces of sackcloth. He rounded it off with a long leather strap he tied over his forehead to again serve as a blindfold to hide his eyes when he used spirit sight, and good piece of canvas that would serve him as a beggar’s tent. He used his last fifteen chits to buy some trail food, cheese and dried meat and some dried fruit, which would tide him over on those days he was either too tired to hunt or couldn’t find anything. He even managed to talk Linny out of a used, battered old set of posts knives they

had behind the counter, for her to add it to his order. They were old, but they were in good condition and they were actually pretty well balanced, and would serve Kyven well as a formidable physical weapon if he couldn't use magic for some reason.

Despite his magic, he was still a deadly man with a thrown knife, and he'd be a fool not to make sure he could use that advantage if he needed it.

"You're a posts player, eh?" she asked with a smile.

"When I can find the time and a game," he answered honestly. "I haven't played in a long time. Not many partners out there." He folded up the canvas and packed it over the other goods in his pack, and then closed it. "Many thanks ma'am. You were a lifesaver. I was feeling all kinds of exposed and a bit silly wearing that blanket."

"Well, you have nice legs, so at least you wore it well," she winked.

He laughed. "Well, I'll be on my way so the old women can gossip about me for the next three months."

"More like six, nothing ever happens around here."

"Well, at least I'll be famous for a good reason," he mused, which made her laugh again.

Shouldering his pack, he got directions to Tobacco Road from one of the fellows standing on the porch, and started off in that direction. He happened to come up on a young man being followed by a young Arcan, probably no more than two, who was wearing a brassy-colored collar. Before he even knew what he was doing, he reached out and put his hand on the young canine's shoulder, smiling down on him, the side of his pinky brushing up against that collar. And in that contact, he drained away the power of the collar's crystal.

"What you doin', mister?" the young man asked.

"Oh, just admiring this handsome young Arcan," he said with a smile. The Arcan child stared up at him in surprise, and then his mouth dropped

open when Kyven's eyes began to glow. "May the spirits bless you, little one," he told him.

The young canine gave him the most curious look, like he had no idea what Kyven was, but was certain that something important and unusual had just happened. Kyven just smiled, leaning closer to the small canine and patting him on the shoulder. He then put his thumbs under his pack straps and strolled towards the road leading to Tobacco Road like he had not a care in the world and was in no hurry to get wherever he was going.

The Loreguard was no doubt hunting him by now, convinced he had escaped Avannar, and would be combing the Free Territories looking for him.

But, Kyven felt that he had an advantage. If they believed that he was Kyven Steelhammer, then the first direction they'd be looking was west, towards Atan. Kyven had a history in Atan, and he knew that country well, so they might think that he would seek out familiar trails and friends that would help him even as a fugitive. But that also didn't mean that they didn't have every Loremaster and Loreguard patrol on Tobacco Road keeping an eye out for a tall, raven-haired young man that would be either traveling alone or with Arcans.

Their problem was simple. They were dealing with someone who didn't leave any trail they could follow.

Kyven never appeared to the same farmstead or sleepy village with the same face. He was always polite and cordial, but he also didn't stay or utilize any inns or visit any cafés or inns or taverns. He simply walked into town, walked through town, and then walked out of town. The only thing that anyone noticed about him was that the man--or woman, when his illusion was that of a woman--would stop and greet every single Arcan, put a hand on the Arcan's shoulder, and then move on. That was very curious behavior.

What was even more curious was the rash of runaway Arcans that proceeded his departure, as Arcans realized their collars no longer worked, slipped them, and bolted for the forests.

For his part, he wasn't entirely sure why he was draining every collar he came across, but he was. It was almost like a compulsion, a need to set things right whenever he saw a collar. He was often doing it before he even knew what he was doing.

Though Kyven's appearance gave the Loreguard no way to track him down or find him, his behavior was consistent enough for some to take notice of it. Two Loreguard riding exhausted horses were asking questions in a little village through which he walked a couple of days after leaving Fried, as he neared Riyan, and they were asking about a lone traveler that seemed to be traveling south along the road that had an unusual interest in Arcans. No one in the village had seen such a person, and Kyven simply strolled through the village while the Loreguard were busy questioning everyone, and the two Loreguard cantered their tired horses past a dog laying lazily in the grass by the road south of the village, which was actually Kyven in disguise.

About five minars south of the village, out where nobody was around to see anything, those two Loreguard *mysteriously disappeared*. Not an hour later, Kyven Steelhammer was riding a brand new horse south towards Riyan, leading a second horse, both of which equipped with gear that looked like it was standard issue Loreguard, but had none of the official emblems.

Those hadn't been that hard to pry off the saddles. It was a good thing that the Loreguard didn't brand their horses, he mused, they instead used an alchemical device that caused the hair to literally glow with magical light to form the Loremaster symbol on the rear flank of every horse, which also doubled as a means for the Loreguard to locate their horses by using an alchemical device, tracking them by those magical brands. The vast majority of horse thieves didn't have a grounder, so the Loreguard didn't

worry all that much about someone figuring out some way to remove that magical mark.

Unfortunately for them, a Shaman would find getting rid of that mark child's play, even a half-trained Shaman like Kyven.

Kyven wouldn't keep something so distinct, though. He got rid of the saddles and bridles, kept the saddlebags, and sold the extra horse and bought a new nondescript saddle and bridle in a sleepy little village that was about ten minars off Tobacco Road, on a country lane that drifted off to the east. He hadn't really planned on riding a horse, but he'd been broke when those Loreguard showed up, and they were a veritable treasure trove of equipment Kyven could sell or trade for equipment or food in addition to their horses. The horse he decided to keep was a rather large, burly roan, barrel-chested and powerful. This wasn't a racing horse, this was a horse born and bred in the Smoke Mountains, a mountain horse that could ride up and down steep hills, the kind of horse that could walk all day and all night and still be ready to go after a short rest and a little food. The roan wouldn't run very fast, but he could run all day...at least after some rest. The Loreguard had rode them hard, and Kyven ambled along at a slow walk, leading the horses, the day after he "liberated" them from the Loreguard. After he reached the village, a night in the village livery did wonders for the burly animal, and he was refreshed and ready to go the next day.

So, thanks to the Loreguard questioners, Kyven now had a horse, two new shockrods, a talker that let him listen in on everything the patrolling Loreguard had to say, two pistols, two alchemical searchlights, a brand new tent, and a purse filled with 67 chits after buying a saddle and tack for his new roan.

He got a good price for that horse.

Riding slow gave Kyven time to adjust to the idea of being on a horse, and also didn't attract much attention to him. He hadn't ridden very much since leaving Atan, and truth be told, he could probably run most horses into the ground. He was far more conditioned than most men, and could run

all day if he wanted to do so, a feat a horse couldn't match. But they were looking for someone *on foot* that was overly friendly to Arcans, and the horse was a convenient means to carry his gear in addition to helping conceal him from the Loreguard. He wasn't a bad rider, he knew how and had had just enough practice back home to not fall out of the saddle and break his butt, but a little more practice wouldn't hurt. Besides, riding the horse actually felt better to his injured ankles, though the bouncing around in the saddle made his injuries throb a bit.

He was on the horse when the city of Riyan came into view as he crested a gentle rise. It looked just as he remembered, except this time he wouldn't be stopped and questioned by a sexy Loreguard officer.

Too bad.

What he did, see, however, was stark evidence of what was coming. Scattered in camps all over the north of the city, just outside it, was a veritable sea of tents. This was where the Loremasters were massing their armies for what was coming. Some of these men would be marching over the mountains to fight the Arcans...though they didn't know that yet. Some would be fortifying the mountain villages and crystal-producing regions of the mountains. Some would be deployed here in the human lands to fend off the kingdoms of Noraam that would oppose the Loremasters' plans by force. He looked out and saw that there had to be 10,000 men camped along the grassy slopes north of Riyan, and this couldn't be even a quarter of the tens of thousands of men the reports said were here. The city had to be all but surrounded by Loreguard armies. Also here, he remembered, were literally every single Loremaster-owned Arcan, collected from every corner of Noraam and brought here in preparation for sending them over the Smoke Mountains, to force them to build the forts they would use out there as a base to establish their claim on Arcan territory.

He, a wanted man, was about to ride through the very heart of the enemy's military forces. But he had no choice. His destination was somewhere to the south, and so he would move on, depending on his illusions and his horse to conceal who he was.

He rode through town without stopping, and without looking around too much. There were a great many Arcans here, and for once, he had to control his impulses to keep the Loreguard from knowing he was in town. According to the talkers, they'd lost him somewhere between the villages of Herigo and Vaiya, but they didn't know if it was Kyven. They had orders to track down *anyone* that attracted any unusual attention or acted in an unusual manner, and Kyven's behavior had caused them to take notice.

They sure as hell knew he'd escaped, for he found himself confronting an image of himself on a poster nailed to a board near the road. Under his rather accurate likeness was the message:

REWARD!

5,000CC.

Must Be Turned In Alive.

Wanted for Murder.

Kyven was rather flattered that they'd offer a 5,000 chit reward for him. That was high enough for every bounty hunter in the Free Territories to start checking under every rock for him, but not so high that people wondered if he'd murdered half of Avannar that he was worth so much bounty. He also thought it was amusing that his supposed crime was literally fine print on the wanted poster.

"Well, that might be worth a look around," a grizzled older man said, with the looks of a woodsman, as he looked at the poster from beside Kyven's horse. "Wonder what he done did. Murder, eh?"

"Nah, that's just what they say he did," Kyven said with a chuckle. "I was there in Avannar when it happened."

“You was there? What he did?”

“He’s a Shaman,” Kyven said. “A *human* Shaman, if you can believe such a thing is possible. He escaped from the Black Keep after they caught him. They tore the city apart looking for him, to the point where a man without roots such as myself decided to go see if it’s still hot in Lanna this time of year.”

“Usually,” he said thoughtfully in reply. “They *knows* he’s a Shaman?”

“That’s what I heard, from the son of a Loreguard in a tavern who heard it from his pa. He said the man said he was a Shaman, and said they found one of the jailors hanging in his chains, and not a whisper of him, like he just vanished into thin air. Ain’t nobody saw a single thing, just poof, gone. Don’t know how much you can set store by it, though. He mighta been lyin’ just to make himself sound impressive, but I don’t see how a normal man could escape from the Black Keep, and that, I *know* he did. I heard it straight from a Loreguard when I asked what the fuss was about.”

“Amen to that, neighbor,” the older man nodded soberly. “I had the bad luck of spending a month in the Black Keep when a disagreement in a bar got bloody. I don’t see how *nobody* could escape from that place, unless he’s got alchemy...or he’s a Shaman.” He looked at the poster again. “I don’t see how a human can be a Shaman, though.”

“On that, my friend, we’re both stumped,” he said with a light smile the man couldn’t see. “But he had to be *something* to walk out of the Black Keep without anyone seeing even a hair of him.”

“True enough,” he agreed. “If he *is* a Shaman, it ain’t worth no five thousand to go get killed tryin’ to catch him. Think I’ll wander back to the tavern. Want to sit a spell, traveler?”

“No thanks. I hear Lanna calling my name, friend.”

“Well, ain’t a man who can resist the call of the road,” he chuckled, patting the roan’s flank. “And that’s a mighty fine horse.”

“Thanks. He’s always been dependable.”

“Mountain horse. Always the best horse for the long road.”

“I see you know your horses, my friend.”

“He got a name?”

“Spirit,” Kyven said with a small smile.

And so, he and his newly named horse ambled out of Riyan, through another sea of Loreguard tents south of the city, past a huge fenced area holding what looked like a few thousand Arcans, and ambled out of sight. Riding was certainly different from walking, and aside from the strange pressure it put on his backside, it wasn’t all that bad...though he preferred walking. But, the horse made him much less conspicuous, and so it helped with his disguise. More than once, Loreguard patrols rode by him, and though he was stopped once for them to inquire as to his destination, the horse seemed to throw them off his trail.

A day of easy riding after leaving Riyan, he found himself at a crossroads, as a rather large and well-traveled road led off to the west. He found himself turning down that road before he knew what he was doing, and understood that his destination lay somewhere off that way, off Tobacco Road. The horse settled into a nice ambling fast walk, nearly a canter, when he felt talons on his shoulder, and sensed the presence of a spirit. It was a small eagle, golden feathers gracing a surprisingly small body, and she settled on his shoulder. In that touch, there was communication. *I bear a message from Clover*, the spirit intoned. *She is frenzied with worry for you, Shaman of the shadow fox. Are you well?*

“I am well, sister eagle,” he answered respectfully. “Injured and a little worse for wear, but I am well. Would you please be so kind as to let her know I am well and am following the path set before me by my totem?”

I can carry your message, Shaman of the shadow fox, as Clover bargained carrying your reply to her as well. Clover’s message continues, however. She has accomplished her mission. The weapons of the Britons are

now in the hands of the Masked and are being sent where they are needed, and the Masked accomplished the task quickly and without harm. She also informs you that Patches, Tweak, and Watcher are well. They have left Atan and travel west along with many of their brother and sister Arcans, fleeing back to Haven, where Patches and Tweak will take up positions of great importance teaching others what you taught them about cutting crystals. Lightfoot and Lucky, however, remain in Atan. Lightfoot awaits word of you, and intends to come to you, wherever you are. Lucky intends to follow Lightfoot wherever she goes. He has taken fancy to her.

“That’s a surprise,” Kyven chuckled. “I’m not sure how Lightfoot will find me.”

Clover can find you, and Clover hastens to Atan. She should be there by late tomorrow.

“Well, if the spirits wish it for her to come to me, then I’ll welcome her, even though I’m not sure yet what my totem wants me to do wherever I’m going,” he said. “We are best friends and work well together.”

Thus is why we do not object to her returning to you. Together, you and Clover are quite formidable.

“Thank you for the compliment, and thank you for bringing me the message, sister eagle. I truly appreciate it.”

It is as was bargained, Shaman, the eagle replied calmly. Would that you could bargain with me so I could heal your wounds, but sister shadow fox would take most unkindly to my lack of manners. Would that you bargain with her for her boon?

“I know better,” he said simply. “Every bargain you make with her ends with her taking far more from you than you intended. I’ll live with the pain.”

Truly, you have become wise in your short time as a Shaman, human, the eagle noted, amused. Sister shadow fox has the snake’s cunning and the wolverine’s temperament.

“That’s the truth,” he grunted. “But thank you for your compassion. It comforts me, sister eagle.”

Compassion is love, Shaman, and love is the greatest thing there is, she answered. I will return to Clover with your answer, as was bargained. Fare well, human, and know that we are pleased with your service thus far. You have proved that humans can be true Shaman.

Kyven felt her talons release his grip on him, and the sense of her faded. “Well, it’s nice to know I’m going to get some trusted company, Spirit,” he told his horse. “Not that you haven’t been a good companion, but at least they can speak.”

The horse snuffled haughtily and urged out to a full canter.

“Alright, alright, take your own pace,” he chuckled, loosing the reins in his hands and letting the horse canter along.

Kyven encountered only one patrol of Loreguard and quite a few other travelers along the western road, that looked to go towards Doram, which was just inside the kingdom of Carin, which bordered the Free Territories to the south. Carin was a very small kingdom bordered by the vast kingdom of Georvan to the south, the sea to the east, and the mountains to the west. Georvan dominated southern Noraam, running from New Jacktown to Hatera, the eastern cape of Noraam dominated by barrier islands. Cheston was within Georvan, but it was independent of Georvan and used to be part of a kingdom known as South Carin before Georvan conquered it some two centuries ago. Carin itself used to be called North Carin until then, but when South Carin became no more, people stopped calling it that and just called it Carin. The other travelers often stopped him to chat a moment, as was the friendly way within the Free Territories, and the Loreguard patrol he encountered seemed to not really care about him very much, riding past him without questioning him. This, Kyven knew from the talker, was because they honestly had no idea where he was, they were still searching for him, but he’d been gone for so long that they no longer believed that he was in the Free Territories. They were focusing their search north of him and to the

west, thinking that he would flee towards Atan and the Smoke Mountains, going back to familiar territory and where he had friends that might help him hide or escape.

For two days, Kyven traveled southwest away from Tobacco Road. His wrists and ankles were healing, albeit slowly, but he could tell after changing the bandages that he would have some ugly scars on his wrists. His flesh had been pulled, twisted, pinched, and torn by his weight, almost to the bone on his left arm, but he could live with it. He'd lost no mobility in either hand, had suffered no permanent damage, and he'd live with the scars if it meant his left hand wasn't a stiffened claw for the rest of his life. His ankles weren't as badly injured, and they had healed most of the way. His left ankle had completely closed over in scabs, and his right was nearly there.

He camped the first night near a small stream back away from the road, in a tiny clearing barely large enough for his tent, and the second night he camped in a grassy meadow on the very top of a hill that overlooked a tobacco plantation...which literally covered the entire region. Small strips of forest or unclaimed land marked the boundaries between the plantations, and the road traveled between them in a nearly straight line, often turning sharply to the right or left to follow the boundaries. He saw hundreds of Arcans working in the fields, and somewhat surprising to him, the plantation hands did not ride over to talk with him.

About an hour after he broke camp and rode on, he crested a small hill and reined the horse in so sharply he almost reared. To his right, he saw it. A plantation on two very low, gentle hills, with a stream flowing in the shallow valley between them that crossed the road. The plantation house, a very large affair that was actually the crown of several buildings in a compound, stood in that valley far back from the road, and there was a whitewashed rail fence bordering the road that had a gate blocking a lane leading along that valley and to the house.

This was the place. This was where his totem told him he needed to go.

This was where his Walk would end. And after that...he guessed he would take his place among his brother and sister Shaman.

But what was he to do here? His totem didn't tell him that...maybe he had to figure it out for himself. Or maybe she would tell him now that he was here.

But one thing seemed clear to him. Here, there would be no hiding. No illusions, no lies, no tricks, no guile and deceit. He would walk in leading his horse, and he would proudly proclaim himself.

"This is it, fella," Kyven noted to his horse, then he dismounted. "This is where we're supposed to be." The horse nickered and nudged him with his nose, and he chuckled and reached up and patted him. "I could let you go, you know. I'm not sure I'm going to need a horse now."

The horse snorted and pushed at him again.

"Alright, but I gave you the chance," he said lightly, patting him on the neck. "Let's go see what kind of mischief we can stir up, Spirit."

He felt anxious more than nervous as he reached the gate, and then opened it and walked in, the horse following him. He padded calmly down the lane as the Arcans took notice of him. There were dozens of them here, all of them with hollow eyes and blank expressions, the expressions of Arcans who had had all life and happiness beaten out of them long ago. These were *slaves*, in every sense of the word. The humans here didn't even really need the collars. Just like those females that sat down on the beach and waited for someone to come get them, these Arcans had become slaves in mind as well as body.

But why was he here? He could find Arcans like this on almost any plantation. Some owners and foremen were kindly, but on big places like this, most of them were not. They saw Arcans as a *commodity*, as numbers, as faceless living machines whose sole purpose was to work...work until they died. Then they just butchered the body to feed to the other machines and buy another one. So, what was special about this place? What made his

spirit send him nearly a week from Avannar to come to this most particular plantation? Was it its location, well away from the bustle of Tobacco Road, yet conveniently close to the Smoke Mountains? Was there a specific person or Arcan here that would help him in his next task? Or was there a lesson waiting to be learned here, the last lesson that the fox would teach on his Walk? She said that his Walk would end at this place, and when he left it, he would be walking the path of the Shaman.

Perhaps that was his task, to figure out what she wanted him to do here. But, to do that, he'd need some information...and to gather information, he'd need to use a *little* guile and deceit. Just enough to keep the entire plantation from either attacking him or fleeing in terror.

A lone human on a horse crested the hill to his left and ahead of him, hesitated, the cantered down a path between sections of tobacco plants and hurried towards him. He was a tall young man, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a pleasant face, if not a handsome one, though he did have a scar over his left eye. "Hold, stranger," the man called as he came down off the hill. "What business do you have here?"

Kyven regarded the man calmly. "I was sent here," he said evenly.

"Sent? Fella, we're full up. I'm sorry if they told ya wrong. Who told you we had work? Jessup?"

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Kyven said lightly.

"Well, guess you can come along and get some lunch, traveler, before you head back. No need for you to leave hungry."

"Sure, that sounds good," he said, mounting his horse.

He followed along behind the hand, looking at the Arcans. They had quite a few, and the plantation just rolled out past those hills for quite a ways. Whoever owned this place had a lot of money and a lot of land. He also saw that they grew more than tobacco. Behind the house and to the right, there were rows and rows of corn, and there were other food plants beside those leading to a fence.

“Pretty big place,” Kyven noted, looking around.

“Yeah, it’s a handful to work,” the hand grunted. “I’m Trevon.”

“Kyven,” he offered.

“That name sounds...familiar somehow. Ever been through this part of the territories, friend?”

“No, my first time here,” he answered.

“Eh, thought I may have heard of ya. Anyway, yeah, the old man got nearly sixty akes of farmed land, and there ain’t nobody behind us. Nothing out west but the mountains.”

“Old man? Who owns this place?”

“General Wilson Danvers, Esquire,” the hand Trevon said with a grunt.

“He sounds charming,” Kyven said grimly.

“Pensioned from the Loremasters, bought this spread.”

“Danvers? The hero of Balton?”

“That’s him,” he nodded. “He relives that battle every other night at the dinner table. I think every hand on the plantation can recite it from memory.” The Balton Incident was the last major Arcan rebellion...such as it was. A large kennel in Ocean City was taken over, a few hundred Arcans escaped, and they fled, sacking farms and plantations, gathering up weapons, and freeing every Arcan they could find along the way. The Loreguard went after them, and caught up to them just outside Balton. What made it notorious was that the Arcans fought back, for they knew they’d be killed no matter what, so they had nothing to lose. General Danvers was outnumbered when the Arcans attacked, by nearly three to one, but his men managed to crush the rebellion, and they slaughtered every single Arcan. That happened some fifteen years ago, within Kyven’s lifetime.

“Sounds like you don’t like him too much.”

“He’s a fancy dandy, and I don’t cotton much to dandies,” Trevon growled. “But he pays well and he’s a fair man when it comes to his hired hands, and I only have to get close to him once a day. His foreman manages the plantation, he just rides around on his horse, entertains guests, and enjoys his retirement.”

“Seems like he uses a heavy hand with his Arcans,” Kyven noted, glancing at a small mouse walking down the lane carrying a water bucket, her eyes down.

“He don’t give a shit about anything but his medals, pardon my language,” Trevon answered. “Bull, the foreman, he’ll beat an Arcan for any reason, even if he has to make one up.”

“Sounds like you don’t like him.”

“Not too fond of him, no, but I don’t have to like him to work with him. He knows farms and he knows farmin’, and he’s why this place makes money. Danvers don’t know one side of the hoe from the other.”

They rode up into the main compound of the house, barns, and other utility buildings. They dismounted and tied their horses to a rail near the stables, and Trevon led him to what looked like a small dorm, like the one at the inn in Avannar. On farms and ranches, though, they were called bunkhouses. Trevon brought him into the common room of the bunkhouse, which already had three men in it as well as a small brown-furred dog and a gray-furred rat Arcan, both wearing collars, and both with swollen faces. They were utterly silent as they served the men plates of beans, boiled corncobs, chicken, and beer. The three men at the long table had the look of men who worked with their hands. The youngest was about eighteen, the oldest nearly forty from the look of him, wearing dirty denim overalls, cotton shirts, and all three had wide-brimmed hats hanging from their backs by a leather cord around their necks. “Hey fellas,” Trevon said. “Got a traveler come through, offered him a bite before he moves on.”

“Hey there, traveler, welcome,” the oldest of the three said, waving him in. “I’m Jack. This ugly fella here beside me is Geral, and the

youngster is Vick.”

“Kyven,” he mirrored, nodding to the man.

One of the men, Geral, dropped his fork. “Kyven? That name sounds, dunno, I heard it before.”

“I guess it’s a popular name around here, Trevon said the same thing,” Kyven said mildly as he accepted a plate from the rat Arcan with a nod.

“So where you off to, Kyven?” the man Jack asked.

“Here,” he answered calmly. “I was sent here, to this very plantation.”

“By who?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Then you must be here to see the General,” Jack grunted. “They trying to lure him out of retirement?”

“Got me. They didn’t send me either.”

“Then why are you here?” the youngest, Vick, asked.

“Dunno,” he shrugged, then took a bite. “Just know I’m supposed to be here. I’ll figure out why when I poke around a bit, I guess. I was just told where to be. I wasn’t told *why*.”

“Well, son, that sound a bit...strange,” Jack noted.

“You’re not the first person to call me strange, Jack,” he chuckled, reaching down and unbuckling his belt holding all his captured weapons, and then dropping it on the table. “That should ease your mind a bit. I don’t think I was sent here to start trouble. If that’s all I was sent to do, well, I passed plenty of other plantations on my way here. And I wouldn’t bring trouble to men who invited me to lunch no matter what.”

“Almost sounds like you’re a Trinity monk,” Trevon chuckled. “Following some inner voice.”

“Or the voices in my head,” Kyven added, which made Trevon laugh. He sensed her appear within the room, the shadow fox. He glanced towards the door and saw her sitting there sedately, tail wrapped around her front legs, glowing eyes fixed on him unwaveringly. But she didn’t speak out, content merely to watch for the moment.

Her appearance caused him to again evaluate this place, looking at it with an impartial eye. The hands seemed decent men, friendly and not judgmental after his wild remarks, accepting him at their table. From what he heard, the main antagonist on the farm was the foreman, Bull, who sounded as mean as a snake. The owner, Danvers, was seen as a hero, having put down a small Arcan rebellion ten years ago, but he seemed to have no care for the workings of his plantation, allowing Bull to run it as he pleased while he enjoyed his retirement.

Retirement. The man was ex-Loreguard, and had been a very high-ranking officer. Was *he* why Kyven was sent to this particular plantation? Kyven doubted he’d been sent down here to kill the man. No, the fox seemed it important that Kyven be here, and the General had something to do with it. *This is where you will begin*, she told him. But begin *what* seemed to be the question.

One thing was plain. No matter what he was to do here, getting rid of Bull was going to be on his agenda. The faces of the two servers in the room were swollen from being beaten, and they moved like they had other injuries hidden under their fur. Men like Bull, who hurt others for their own amusement, had no business nor place in this world. Even if there were no Arcans, they’d still hurt things...probably dogs and cats and other small, defenseless animals, even children and women. Anything that could not hurt them *back*. Kyven had been on the receiving end of a man with similar sadism, and he wouldn’t allow men like Arthur Ledwell to roam the world when he knew about them.

“It does sound a bit crazy,” Jack told him. “But any man willing to take his pistol belt off and sit a meal with us nobodies is crazy to begin with,” he grinned.

“Why, thank you, Jack. You make it sound like this crazy man is in like company.”

They ate their meal with amiable chatter, as Kyven gently yet carefully urged more information out of them. There were twelve farmhands that worked under Bull, who ran the farm. They ate lunch in shifts, he learned, so there were hands out directing the nearly hundred Arcans that worked the farm. The General had little to do with his plantation except he lived upon it, and spent his days riding his thoroughbred horses by day and attending parties or entertaining the upper class of owners and important people by night. He was a man fully enjoying his retirement, who seemed relatively harmless as things go outside of his blind eye to the sadistic bent of his foreman. But for an ex-Loreguard like him, the treatment of the Arcans he owned probably never crossed his mind. If he had a similar mindset that Danna had had at first, he wouldn't care. The Loremasters taught their people not only that Arcans were animals, but that it was entirely alright, even encouraged, to mistreat them.

And soon, all the Arcans would be gone. The entire backbone of Noraavi society would collapse, he realized, for the kingdoms of Noraam absolutely depended on the slave labor they employed. But just like the crystals, the days of the slave era were numbered. Haven was moving, and once they were out in the open, they wouldn't stop until all the Arcans were free of the collars. There would be war...or there would have been, if the Loremasters were not in the middle mucking things up. The double whammy of losing the crystals and losing the Arcans would cause violent upheaval in Noraam, and that was unavoidable.

There could be no happy endings for everyone.

The humans would suffer for losing the Arcans, and there was no way that Haven could soften that blow, no matter how hard they tried. If they warned the humans ahead of time, they might respond with violence against their Arcans or go to war to keep them. What had to be done was what Clover suggested, to free the Arcans from within *before* the humans realized what was happening, and then just flee with them back over the

mountains. The only way to save the Arcans was to cause harm to the human race, unavoidable harm.

Was that why he was here? To start an Arcan revolt, like Clover had considered?

No. All things considered, he was a poor choice to lead Arcans. For one, even though he was a Shaman, he was still human. The other Shaman accepted him, but Arcans who had no idea of him would not. They would see him as a human. They would only follow him after they were certain he was on their side, and in something like a revolt, where they had to move quickly, he wouldn't have the time to convince Arcans at every farm and plantation to follow him. As a human, he would get the obedience of the slaves, but not the loyalty of the fighters...and he'd need loyalty far more than obedience. Besides, he had no idea how to manage a large group.

What Kyven *could* do, however, is move effortlessly and without hindrance through Noraam. He was human, and unlike any other Shaman, he did not have to hide and move carefully. He could mount a horse and ride anywhere he pleased. He understood human customs, and was the only Shaman who could function in a fully human situation, because he *was* human.

He was not fit to *lead* an Arcan revolt...but the one thing he could do would be to *speak* for it. Clover was coming. Clover and Lightfoot both. With Clover to lead the Arcans and Lightfoot to teach them to fight, and Kyven to scout ahead to sniff out the locations of plantations and track down Loreguard, maybe even trick and misdirect them, a large number of Arcans could move about with little resistance, and might force the Loremasters to tie up the large army they had massing near Riyan to deal with an uprising, further giving Haven and Flaur time to set up. His training had been as a spy, and his forte was guile and deceit.

The one thing Kyven could do over any other Shaman was use his skills and training to wreak havoc through the Free Territories. The primary goal of all of this was to prevent the Loremasters from gaining a foothold in

Arcan territory, for it was out there, away from Noraam, where they intended to try to build the machine, and from that base they would try to gain access to the original machine that created the Arcans. But beyond that, the Loremasters had to be destroyed. If they were denied their plans to form their own kingdom out in the frontier as a secure base to build their machine, they may decide to build it in the one place where they had absolute control...Avannar.

Kyven hadn't been trained to lead Arcans or run an army, he had been trained to be a quiet, skulking spy, and when needs be, an assassin. To put him in control of an army of slave Arcans was a waste of his training and skills. No, the fox had something else in mind, and he had a sudden feeling he was about to find out what it was.

The door opened, and two men stepped in. One was a huge man, both tall and wide, with a balding pate of brown hair and a brutish, unpleasant face, wearing farmer's coveralls and a cotton shirt. The other man was a tall, slender man of a strong bearing, wearing black breeches tucked into knee-high boots polished to a sheen, a red riding waistcoat with split tails with a linen shirt under it, and a wide-brimmed hat with a chin strap. The man had a military bearing, and Kyven knew immediately that this man had to be the plantation owner, General Wilson Danvers.

Danvers gave Kyven a long, calm look. Then, to the shock of every man in the room, he pulled out his pistol, put the muzzle against the back of the big man's head, and blew his brains out. Blood and gore flew in an arc from the exit wound, and the big man collapsed to the floor in a boneless heap. "Father, I've wanted to do that for six months," he said with an explosive sigh, stuffing his pistol back into his belt holster.

"G-General, what the hell?" Jack asked in shock.

"I won't tolerate his vicious ways another minute, not after what he did over by the Simmons farm to Miss Delilah."

"Bull did that?" Jack said with a sudden scowl.

“He did. I just came back from there, and they proved it was him enough for me to take action. The Sheriff gave me leeway to handle the matter myself.” He turned to Kyven. “Master Steelhammer, I welcome you to Twin Hills. Please, come up to the main house. I’ve been waiting for you.”

“The wanted poster!” the youngest said, snapping his fingers. “That’s where I done seen him before!”

“That’s right, Vick, though I know for a fact from my old Loreguard friends that the charges are false. He was framed. Master Steelhammer had every good right to run, and you’ll not say a single word that he’s here,” Danvers said, to which all three men nodded calmly. “Now be good boys and bury that piece of trash somewhere far off my property. No doubt the grass that grows over him will be diseased. And congratulations, Jack, you’re my new foreman. I’m sure you’ll do the plantation proud.”

“Yes sir, General Danvers,” Jack said, standing up. “We’ll see to it.”

A little startled, Kyven followed the thin, sturdy man out of the bunkhouse and towards the main house. “Was it a rough roll to get here?” he asked conversationally.

“Nothing I couldn’t handle,” Kyven answered. “How did you know I was coming?”

“Welcome to a stop along the Network, Master Steelhammer. But down here, we call it the Freedom Trail.”

“You’re in the Masked,” Kyven noted, then he chuckled when Danvers nodded.

“As are about half my men, though the other half don’t know it,” he said. “But now that you’re here, they won’t work here much longer, since the plantation won’t be here either.”

“What do you mean?”

“We’ll discuss it inside,” he said.

“I’m curious how the hero of Balton ended up on this side.”

“It’s because of Balton,” he answered when they mounted the porch. A slender little canine female with brown fur, in a pretty blue wool dress, opened the door for them, and she took Danvers’ hat with a smile and a nod. “But that’s a long story for when we have time. I’ve received orders, and now that you’re here, we’ll carry them out.”

“I haven’t been told what we’re doing, General.”

He gave Kyven a slight look as they moved through a richly appointed foyer which had a large pair of bronze-covered double doors at the far side, giving the foyer a bit of elegant class. “I’m coming out of retirement, son,” he said simply. “I’ve been told what the Loremasters are trying to do, and they’re maniacs. They have to be stopped. Right now, in the forests behind the plantation, I have nearly three thousand men camped. They’re not Masked, but they’re loyal to my name and the chits I pay them, and they’ll fight. As soon as those Briton rifles get here, we’re marching out.”

“We’re attacking Avannar?” he asked, in surprise.

Danvers shook his head. “Riyan. Our mission is to free the Arcans collected by the Loremasters, which are to be marched out towards the mountains at the end of the month. We were promised a Shaman to help with the operation, and they sent you. And with *you* here, we have a damn good chance. I’ve been told your specialty is infiltration and covert action.”

“It is,” Kyven nodded. “But you’ll get more than just me. There’s another Shaman in the area, and she’s coming to join us.”

“She? Clover’s coming?” Kyven nodded, and it caused Danvers to laugh lightly. “I feel a whole lot better about this, I was afraid it was going to be Stalker they send, and instead I get a Shaman perfect for what we have to do and Clover, who’ll be perfect for the second phase of the operation. Anyway, as far as you’re concerned, if you can get inside and get the Arcans ready to move, we can do this fast and with minimal risk,” he explained as they moved through a dining room and to an office just off a

hallway behind it, which had a single window that looked out over the barn and corral, a corral holding several fine-looking horses. “Things are coming to a head, Shaman,” he said. “Once I have the Arcans, my orders are to arm them with anything I can find and march them south, picking up every Arcan we can find along the way, which is where Clover will be very useful. She can talk a rattlesnake into biting its own tail. We’re marching on Cheston.”

“Cheston?”

He nodded. “I have orders to take it and hold it until I get relief, which I have no idea who that will be. But I’ll do it, because it needs to be done. With enough Arcans and my soldiers there to command them, I can hold the city for a year against a force five times bigger than mine.” He sat down at his desk. “The Loremasters are going to tear Noraam apart, and that can’t be allowed,” he said in a gruff voice. “They intend to start a war. Well, we’re making sure *we* get the first shot.”

“How much of it do you know?” Kyven asked.

“I’ve been told that the crystals are almost gone,” he said, looking up at Kyven. “And the Loremasters are going to take advantage of the social unrest that’ll create to try to take over all of Noraam, as well as push human territory west of the Smoke Mountains. I have lots of friends in the Loreguard, and they’ve been keeping me up on what’s going on, son, and it’s exactly what the Masked said. They’re getting ready for major action. They’re going to march into the mountains and take over all the remaining crystal-producing areas, and then dig in like there’s no tomorrow and defend those resources against anyone that tries to take them. In addition to that, a group of twenty thousand soldiers and every Arcan and hired laborman they can find is scheduled to leave at the end of the month, and I managed to find out where. Their destination is where the Deep River and the Snake River merge, a very long ways west of here. They’re not just sending men and slaves, son, they’re sending enough building materials and supplies to build a *city*. That tells me everything I need to know right there. They’re gonna bunker up at a critical tactical position like the meeting place

of two major navigable rivers, and they have no earthly reason to do that unless they intend to make that presence permanent. From that position, the outpost can get supplies from either the Deep or Snake Rivers, from Two River by way of the Cuman Pass or from Nurys or Alexton, and it gives them a river route into the upper plains of the Snake River Valley, hell, all the way over to the Stone Mountains on the far side of the continent. Anyone who controls that point controls those rivers, anyone who controls those rivers controls movement through the frontiers of the prairies of central Noraam, and you have no reason to control those rivers unless you intend to use them.

“I found all this out about two weeks ago,” he grunted as he poured himself a drink from a bottle on his desk. “I got the orders to take direct action about six days ago, about the same time you escaped from Avannar. I called in every soldier I could find, men who have a grudge against the Loremasters and would love nothing better than to pay them back, men who will fight, and most of them have arrived. Our mission is to stop those armies from deploying, and we’ll do that by forcing them to stay on this side of the mountains to deal with a sudden armed insurrection against the Loremasters. We’ll strip them of their slave labor by raiding Riyan, then we’ll beat feet south. All my men are mounted and Arcans can move a hell of a lot faster than human infantry, so we’ll have no trouble outrunning the Loreguard on our way south. We’ll hit Cheston, free the fighting Arcans they love to raise there, and then give them a chance to give back what they got after we bunker in at Cheston and fight off the counterattack. Then we hold the city until reinforcements arrive.”

“A pretty crazy plan.”

“Sometimes crazy works,” he said simply in reply. “And it has surprise on its side. The Loreguard will never in their wildest dreams expect an attack on Riyan, and since my men will be armed with rifles that will let them decimate any resistance from far out of musket range, we’ll stand a good chance of accomplishing our mission there. Reports I’ve got on Riyan shows that their security and precautions are very lax. The city is just *begging* for someone to come along and raid the fuck out of it, and put the

fear of the Father into my old Loreguard compatriots. They're acting like they're on leave, not in a war...well, we're gonna teach them just what they're in for. After that, we just move south and collect up every Arcan we can find, to either fight with us or deny the Loremasters from taking them to replace the Arcans we take from Riyan. Without their slave labor force, they'll be delayed trying to find builders to replace them. Meanwhile, I've been told that elements of the Masked are going to try to take over Atan and Two River, to deny the Loremasters routes into the Smoke Mountains. The only two passes that can handle wagons are the Cuman Pass up Two River way and the South Pass southwest of here, but they'll find organized resistance that will make them pay in blood for every wagon they get through the mountains.

"That's my job," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Your job is to help. You're supposed to be a spy and an assassin, the Shaman that managed to slip through the fingers of the Loremasters in Avannar for *months* before they finally caught you, and looking at you I can see why. A *human* Shaman...I bet they still can't bring themselves to believe it. I can use a man like you and your special talents. You'll go in first in Riyan and get the Arcans ready to move, which will make that raid a hell of a lot easier. After that you'll scout ahead of the army as we move south, disrupting communications, and doing what you can to keep them from finding us and pinning us down. They'll know where we've been by the trail we leave, but the key to getting to Cheston is making sure they can't organize in front of us and set a trap. From what I was told, I could send you into a town, and an hour later every Loremaster and Loreguard officer will be dead and every talker or other alchemical communication device will be hunted down and eliminated."

"I can do it," Kyven said with a nod.

"That's exactly what we'll need," the man said calmly. "With you running in front of us, we can get past population centers without the Loreguard knowing every move we make. The key to any military campaign is communication and intelligence, son. Whichever side knows more about the enemy and is able to communicate with the rest of the army

more effectively wins, even if they're outnumbered. I intend to rob our opponents of both, and that's your primary objective. You will blind the Loreguard to keep them from knowing where we are and where we're going, which will make it much harder for them to organize a response in front of us. That will make them chase us, and if they have to chase us, then we accomplish our mission of preventing those armies from deploying to the west. We get to Cheston, take it over, dig in, and wait. For what I'm not sure, but we'll wait."

"For Flaur, General," Kyven told him. "Flaur intends to fight. If we attack Cheston, the Flaurens will realize they have help, and they'll move."

"Really? Damn, we have a chance," he grinned. "If the Flaurens can do anything, son, it's fight."

"I just wonder how Georvan is going to react when we invade their territory."

"They'll applaud and cheer when we go right on past and hit Cheston. Georvan's been trying to annex Cheston for decades, but they've never quite managed it. It sticks in their craw that there's an independent city literally surrounded by Georvan territory, and sitting at the mouth of the Collia river besides. Cheston chokes off the river trade of Georvan's river cities, and they'd love nothing better for Cheston to get themselves invaded by some other army. They'll just set up to march in and take over after we pull out. The bigger question is, what will Georvan do when they find out what the Loremasters are doing," he said, taking a sip of his drink. "If Flaur intends to fight, they'll need permission from Georvan to move their troops north. The king of Georvan is no fool, however. Odds are, he'll just add his own armies to Flaur's as they come up from the peninsula. No king wants to see the Loremasters take control of Noraam, because it means he loses his crown to the Circle." He leaned back. "The wild card will be Carin. The kingdom is much smaller than Georvan and the Free Territories, and the king knows he's in a very precarious position. He may not fight against the Loremasters, but he may not help them either. A weak kingdom always has

to play its cards carefully or it gets swallowed up by a stronger one, the very way South Carin was swallowed up by Georvan.”

Kyven was impressed. This General Danvers was a very intelligent man, but he also had a very firm grasp on the politics of the kingdoms of Noraam.

“We’ll be moving as soon as those rifles get here.”

“The Briton rifles?”

He nodded. “They’re on their way here now. Armed with those rifles, my men and any Arcans that fight with us have a major tactical advantage. Those rifles have double the accurate range of a musket and fire ten times faster. As soon as they get here, we move across country so they don’t see us coming. We collect up my Arcans and my hands, the army will come out, and we ride, hit Riyan, then pull back to the south.”

“I’m still surprised they’re not sending us against Avannar.”

“We’d get wiped out, son. Avannar is a walled city, and they’d only have to hold out long enough for the army coming up from Riyan to catch up with us. Besides, think about it. If Flaur is really in this with us against the Loremasters, what we’ll be doing is luring the Loreguard army into a position where they’ll be counterattacked by a larger force once they try to dig us out of Cheston, and then we reinforce the Flaurens as we march back to the north. Now that I know what’s going on, I can see that that’s the entire objective of our mission, to draw the Loreguard forces into a position where they can be attacked by the Flaurens. If we take out that army, then the Loreguard and the Loremasters are going to be in a pickle, because a very large army will be coming up from the south, and we’ll have just wiped out a very large chunk of the available forces they would have had in position to try to stop us.”

“I...see,” he said with a nod. The General was exactly right. What they were doing was setting a trap, and it would be an effective one. The raid on Riyan would cause the Loreguard to chase them south, and if they chased

them long enough, they'd run right into the Flaurens as they moved *north*. Despite the fact that the Loremasters *knew* that Flaur was going to go to war with them, they would have no choice but to go after Danvers and his army. One didn't just allow a hostile force to roam around within one's territory. Kyven rather doubted that they'd send the entire army after Danvers, at least until Danvers started conscripting Arcans to fight for him, Arcans who would do it *because there was a Shaman with them*. The Arcans would obey a Shaman...and that was one reason why Danvers needed a Shaman to accomplish his mission. With Clover there to bring Arcans into Danvers' army, it would quickly swell to a force large enough to force the Loremasters to send a large complement of the tens of thousands of men they had stationed around Riyan to destroy it.

It wasn't an Arcan rebellion...it was something much, much more devious. Where Kyven or Clover wouldn't have been able to pull off something like this because they had no idea how to do it, had no experience in military matters, the Masked had found someone that *did* have the kind of training and experience to conduct a military campaign against the Loremasters using Arcans freed from the collar and given a chance to fight for their freedom. With veteran human soldiers to help the untrained Arcans learn enough about fighting and soldiering to be useful, they had a good chance of drawing that Loreguard army to the south, digging in, then letting Flaur march up from their peninsula and wipe it out. The Loremasters, fearing an attack from Phion to the north, wouldn't commit their entire army to facing the Flaurens, and that would give them a chance to push deep into the Free Territories. If the Flaurens and their allies could defeat the Loreguard at Riyan, they had a good chance of taking Avannar.

And that would solve *everyone's* problems so far as the Loremasters went.

"Well, it'll push a bit, but I'm used to playing from behind the line," Kyven finally said. "I'm yours to command, General."

“Good. Now, just because I *have* to know...are you *really* a Shaman, Steelhammer?” Danvers’ eyes widened when Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits, and then he laughed delightedly. “I never thought I’d see the day. But I think it’s a good thing.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, General.”

“You look a bit travel worn, Master Steelhammer, so I’ll have you set up with a room, a bath, and a chance to rest a bit.”

“I’d like that, thank you. It’s been a long ride, and all my clothes are getting a bit fragrant.”

“Missy!” he called loudly. Almost immediately, the little canine opened the door to the study. “Take Master Steelhammer here and get him a room and draw him a bath, if you please, my dear. He’ll be staying with us for a while, and he will be treated as an honored guest.”

The little canine nodded, and offered her paw towards Kyven.

“Arcan servants?”

“It keeps up appearances, which is important given this plantation is a major stop along the Freedom Trail. Besides, this one can shoot your eyes out from two hundred rods, Steelhammer, and she’s carrying a pepperbox pistol in that pretty little dress,” Danvers smiled. “My Arcan helpers can protect themselves, and their collars are fakes. It’s part of the deception.”

“So, Bull was part of the deception?”

“Unfortunately,” he grunted. “I hated it, but in his brutish way, he helped hide the truth of this place, because no one believed I’d ever be the type to be in the Masked. The Arcans that helped me were willing to endure his abuse to continue to help move Arcans along the trail, and for that I have tremendous respect for them. But he’d gotten too brutal, and last week he raped the daughter of another plantation owner up the road. The sheriff was going to come arrest him, but I talked him into letting *me* take care of it. Believe me, pulling that trigger was the high point of my whole week.

I've wanted to kill that bastard since the day I hired him." He looked towards the canine. "Missy, if you didn't know, Kyven here is a Shaman, a *human* Shaman."

Her eyes widened, and she rushed up to him, taking his hand. "Will you bless me, Shaman?" she asked immediately.

"Of course, little one," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder and reciting the ritual benediction, which nearly made her quiver with delight. "I'm glad me being a human doesn't bother you."

"A Shaman is a Shaman," she told him simply, leaning into his hand when he gently cupped her cheek. "Please come with me, honored Shaman. I'll see to your needs."

The little canine Missy took him upstairs, and to a room so large that he almost felt like he was in a workshop. It was dominated by a four-poster bed, complete with curtains, but also had a sitting sofa facing a large window that afforded one a spectacular view of the Smoke Mountains. The little canine turned down his bed for him despite the fact that it was only a little past noon, and then she stepped through a door on the far side of the room. He heard running water past the room, and it shouldn't have been a surprise to him that a house like this would have internal plumbing. She came out holding a towel and a robe. "The bath will be ready in a few minutes, Shaman," she informed him. "Would you like me to have your clothes washed?"

"That's kind of you, little one," he told her. "I could stand to have all my clothes washed, and just endure with the robe until they're done."

She nodded, then gave him a slightly startled look as he started undressing right then and there. "What?" he asked.

"You're much braver than most humans, Shaman," she told him, giving him an appraising look as he shrugged out of his vest and shirt. "Most would send me out to undress."

“I spent enough time among the Arcans to understand your customs, little one,” he told her as he sat down on the edge of the bed and removed his boots and trousers, which left him nude before her. She helped him into the robe, and then put the towel on his shoulder and started collecting up his clothes.

“May I take the clothes from your pack, Shaman?”

“You’re welcome to,” he told her as he padded to the door from which the sound of water emanated. It was a large bathing room dominated by a huge ivory-colored tub, into which water flowed from a faucet. The water, he found with a touch, was hot, but not painfully so, and there was soap in a dish on the edge of the tub. A hole in the bottom of the tub, which was currently stoppered, would drain the water out of the tub by means of a pipe that sank into the floor when he was finished.

“Would you like anything else, honored Shaman?” she asked from the door.

“I’m good, thank you very much. I’m just looking forward to a nice hot bath, that’s all.”

After the bath was filled, he settled into the hot water, and felt the weariness of days of travel seep out of his muscles, and also to ponder the plan Danvers set out. It wasn’t really Kyven’s specialty, but he’d do what he could to help...and he could help. Danvers was right that Kyven would be best at infiltrating Riyan, disabling the collars of the Arcans held there, and be there to coordinate to get them out when the time came, when Danvers attacked. That attack would be a hit and run, hit hard at a point where Kyven would take out the Arcans, cover them as they escaped, then run like hell. It would be dangerous, the most danger to the Arcans themselves and to Kyven, who had to protect them as they fled from their pens. He would be the most exposed, at the most risk, but he would take that risk. There was no one better suited to the task than him. Nobody else could get inside, move through the Loreguard, reach the pens, and get the collars off the Arcans without getting killed. Afterward, he would protect the moving

formation by moving in front of them, eliminating the ability of the Loreguard to communicate, which again was something which he was well suited to accomplish. He had the best chance of infiltrating a village, killing the resident Loremaster, eliminating the Loreguard command structure, and then destroying all alchemical devices anyone could use to warn of the moving army.

She was there. He opened his eyes and saw her sitting sedately on the surface of the water, over his legs, her tail wrapped around her front paws and her unblinking eyes regarding him. "Shadow fox," he said aloud, nodding his head to her. A mixture of anger and respect reared up in him, hatred and obedience. His feelings for his treacherous spirit were still jumbled, mixed, as he raged against her for everything she had done to him, yet was still her Shaman, still obeyed her utterly, even now that she no longer held his humanity over him like a carrot to entice him to obey. He had accepted his lot with dignity, accepted that he was her Shaman, and he would endure her cruelty if only for the good he could do for others.

He was needed. And for him, there would be no happy ending.

She unwound her tail from her legs and dipped it under the water, against his knee. And in that touch, there was communication. *You have well pleased me, Shaman,* she intoned, her voice...prideful. *For now, do as the human needs. In time, you will return to Avannar to again delve the secrets of the Loremasters, but not now. Things change, and the Loremasters will change their plans to deal with changing events. When they have reset those plans, you will return to discover those changes. For now, you need time away for them to believe you gone for good, which is why I have urged you to be...visible away from Avannar. They need to see you are out of the city, so when you do return, they will believe you to be elsewhere. But until then, you will do what you can where you can.*

She lowered her head, under his chin, then touched his upper chest with her nose. He distinctly felt something settle against his chest, and then she withdrew. He looked down, and saw that there was now a black foxhead medallion around his neck, just like the old one. *It is exactly like the old*

one, she informed him, her tone...mischievous. *You may need your Arcan body in the future, Shaman, and this will supply it to you.*

“But it won’t work anymore. Danna—“

Danna is still linked to you through this, Shaman. When I gave you back your humanity, I took it from her. She has replaced you as my shadow fox Arcan...and she is now mine. Now, when you take the Arcan form, she will supply it to you. Aside from the fact that it now allows you to take an Arcan form rather than a human one, it still operates exactly the same, Shaman.

Kyven actually laughed, without humor. Spirits, she had actually managed to trick Danna into bargaining away her *humanity*. And now, Danna was utterly in her thrall, for she had to obey the shadow fox to get back what was taken from her...just as Kyven had done. It showed just how treacherous his spirit was...and yet, he still would obey her.

What else could he do?

The coming mission will be dangerous, my Shaman.

“I understand the danger. I’ll take the risk.”

As it should be, she sniffed, then she dipped her head under the surface of the water and locked her jaws around his forearm. She pulled his arm out, which surprised him a little, then she began to lick the wound on his wrist, which was now half-healed. Her tongue was hot, and strangely soothing, as she licked away the pain. *I would not send my Shaman out into danger while wounded*, she intoned haughtily as she systematically licked away the wound on his wrist. *The other one.*

A little startled, he offered his other arm to her, and saw her expression was...pleased. She had surprised him, and she rather liked that fact. But that was just within her nature, he realized. This was all just part of her little game, the game the two of them had been playing since the first day he saw her...though he’d not understood the game, or the rules, until after she had exploited them to all but allow her to win. She licked away all the pain,

licked away the wound, then she startled him rather badly by leaning forward and licking him on the cheek. It was...gentle. Intimate. He closed his eyes and leaned back in the tub, but she simply chased him, licking at his cheek and neck like a puppy. *You have finished your Walk, my Shaman,* she announced as she licked at his ear. *You now stand with your brothers and sisters as an equal, and may speak in council. What you learn from this day, you will not need my guidance to understand. You have gained wisdom. Know that I am pleased with you, Kyven Steelhammer, Shaman of the Shadow Fox.* My Shaman, she announced proudly. *Walk forth from this place with my full blessing, for so long as you give me your loyalty, I shall ever walk beside you.*

And then, she taught him the final spell. It was a spell perfect for a being of guile and deceit. It was a spell of illusion, but this illusion was of the victim's own making, powered by Kyven's magic, and visible only to the victim. It delved into the fears of the victim and presented an illusion of what he feared most, which might cause them to flee in terror, freeze like a frightened rabbit, attack the illusion, however that particular person would respond to their deepest terror realized before them. It could be used to terrify attacking guards, torment a prisoner into giving up information, and if Kyven was cornered, it was one hell of a devastating means of striking back, in a way that could not be stopped.

It made perfect sense, given what kind of spirit he served.

According to her, his training was complete. He would still learn, still grow wiser, would still learn new spells by watching others and experimenting himself, but she would teach him no more. From this moment, he would walk forth as a Shaman of the Shadow Fox, and he had her full confidence.

That, at least, he fully believed.

"I will do my best, my spirit," he whispered.

I can ask for nothing more, nor nothing less, she answered evenly. *I will leave you now, my Shaman. In a moment, you will be...busy,* she

intoned with amusement, and then the shadows converged around both of them. He *felt* what happened, he *felt* what she did, far more clearly this time than the last, when he had been exhausted and frightened. He felt the shadows respond to her call, felt them gather her up and form a...a *bridge* between one shadow and the next, a bridge formed by a strange place, a place not of the spirit world. It was a place of, of, of...*shadows*. She would be gathered up by one shadow, step *through* that other realm, and then emerge from another shadow on the other side. The shadows were the gateways into that other place, a place where a single step moved one from one shadow to another in the material world.

That was how she did it! And was absolutely convinced that with a little practice, he could learn to do it too, because now he understood *how* she did it!

He looked at his wrists, which were now fully healed, the skin smooth and unscarred, and could only chuckle. He doubted he would *ever* understand his spirit...and that was just the way she liked it.

There was stirring, movement out in the bedroom. Kyven put his hands on the lip of the tub to get up, but the door banged open, and Clover was standing there. She gave him one look, gave an excited squeal, and literally dove at him from all the way across the bathroom. She landed heavily in the tub, splashing water everywhere, licking his face with exuberance. He laughed and put his arms around him, and gave her a gentle squeeze. "I'm so happy to see you, my brother!" she exclaimed. "I was so worried!"

"I'm alright, sister, I'm alright," he told her, pushing her out enough to look at her. "You made good time getting here."

"I had plenty of motivation," she answered with a grin, slurping her tongue up his entire face, from chin to hairline, making him sputter, then laugh helplessly.

"Now get out of my bath, you silly coyote. You're getting hair in my water."

She laughed and clambered out of his tub, then used the spell that stripped water out of her fur, the one he had more or less invented, to dry out. He stood up and stepped out, grabbing the towel, but then Lightfoot slammed into him before he could get it around his waist. Her claws dug into his sides, and she rasped her rough tongue across his cheek. “Hello, my little warrior,” he laughed, hugging her. “I’m glad you’re alright. Did you do your duty?”

“I burned it to the ground,” she answered, nuzzling her muzzle against his chest.

“That’s my girl,” he said, patting her shoulder. “Lucky! Why didn’t you go to Haven?” he asked as the calico looked into the bathroom.

“I thought you might need another pair of paws, Shaman,” he answered. “I wanted to help.”

“Well, we’ll make sure that’s exactly what you do,” he said as he offered his hand. Lucky rushed up and took it, holding Kyven’s hand between his furry hands, a silly smile on his face.

“Now, since I’m standing here naked, let me find my robe, then we’ll sit down and catch up,” he said, but Clover grabbed hold of the amulet around his neck.

“I thought she changed you back. Firetail sent me a message. She said you were human, and that Danna is now a shadow fox Arcan, that she used Danna to change you back.”

“She did. I’ll explain this later. And everything it represents.”

She gave him a look, then nodded. “*Brother*,” she said formally. “I welcome you to the path.”

“Sister,” he returned, taking her hand.

Chapter 7

There was a big difference between understanding how to do something, and actually doing it.

The room was dark, with only a tiny point of light coming in from a covered window to produce deep, deep shadow, the type of shadow he needed right now, since he was still learning this trick. This was shadow at its strongest, the darkest shadow could get before becoming complete dark, which was not shadow and therefore meant nothing. For it to be shadow, there had to be light. There was nothing in the room except for him, and he sat on the floor, nude, eyes open and both mind and body completely attuned to the shadow that surrounded him. He could see it, sense it, was part of it, and he was in a state of concentration, of meditation, that allowed him to control it.

For two straight days he had worked at nothing but this. Three times, he had *almost* managed to accomplish his objective of disappearing from this empty room and appearing in the cellar, in a closed-off area with naught but a tiny window in one corner almost against the ceiling, leaving the room in dark shadow. Three times, he had managed to disappear from the room he was in, but failed to traverse the distance and appear in the cellar because of the nature of where he went when he vanished.

He had been wrong about one thing. The fox hadn't stepped through that other place instantly. There was real travel involved in that other place, that place of shadow, and the three times he had entered it, he had lost his concentration and had fallen back into the real world because the place was confusing...and unwelcoming.

There were...*things* in there. The three times he'd crossed into the shadow, he sensed them almost immediately, and they were not friendly. All three times, he appeared within that world of shadow, saw where he wanted

to go, but then the vertigo of the place would assault him because it was a place that had no up or down, no near or far, not even a sense of time. It merely *was*, in its myriad forms, and that radical difference from the real world was enough to confuse him. Just about the time he was starting to get his senses in there and would be able to cross over to the cellar, he would sense *them*, sense them coming towards him, seeking him out. Without seeing them, without getting anywhere near them, he could feel that they would not greet him kindly if they caught him. Their presence would make him antsy and uncertain, he would lose his concentration, and then fall back into the real world.

But he would persevere. He knew he could do it, he was absolutely certain of it. He just had to conquer the vertigo and get to where he wanted to be quickly as soon as he entered that shadowy world. It was a place with no sense of distance, but there *was* distance in that he had to get from his start point to his end point while inside that place. It was like...like a ten year journey accomplished by a single step. Distance, time, they were jumbled in there, they all but didn't exist, and he had the feeling that the only reason he perceived distance between his start and end points was because he *believed* there was distance between them. He was thinking in real-world terms in a place that had no similar dimensions, and his belief was enough to cause what he believed to be his own reality within it.

That was what he was trying to solve now. He had to convince himself that there was no distance, just like convincing himself in the veracity of an illusion so as to fool others, but, he also had to maintain the sense of distance between him and the *things* in there, so they couldn't get him. His sense of distance impressed itself upon *them* as well as himself, and forced them to actually travel to get close to him, which gave him the time to get scared, get confused, and then lose his concentration and drop out of that world back where he started.

He situated himself, framing everything in his mind. All his practice and work using illusions was going to help him now, for he had conditioned his mind to work in the exact way it needed to work to do this, to selectively believe something in one manner, but believe in a matter that

contradicted the first without ruining either one. It was all about how it was framed in his mind. He envisioned it as a simple step, a doorway from which he would step and another into which he would enter that were but a single step apart, which was vital point since his entire body had to enter that other place for this to work. He had to spend *some* time completely within that shadow world, and he would envision it as a single step. He would appear in the world with the door from which he came behind him, and the door into which he would go immediately before him, dominating his field of view and allowing him to cross to his destination with a single step. These doors would be *far, far* away from the beings in there, to give him the time he needed to take that single step and return to the real world where he wanted to appear.

He was ready to try again.

He blew out his breath and closed his eyes to center himself, and then he opened them and called out to the shadow. It responded immediately, surrounding him, infusing him, and he wrapped them around himself like a blanket, just as the fox had done so many times. The shadows converged around him, and when they fully surrounded him, he *pushed* at them in a way he couldn't quite explain, pushing an opening into that other place. This part he had accomplished many times, opening the doorway into the shadowy world, but only three times had he actually passed through it and tried to move. He had practiced opening the doorway many times before trying to go through it to ensure he could do it right, make it stable; he didn't relish the idea of losing concentration and having it cut him in half when it closed while he was inside it. When the door was open, he didn't step through it, he instead had the doorway pass around him. His eyes swam in an undulating darkness, like being in a sea of swirling ink, and a very cold mist seemed to surround him; the shadows were not a place of warmth, but of cold. A strange, dank smell touched his nose, but he found no need to breathe, in fact could not force his lungs to exhale, as if there was nothing here to breathe...yet he found no need or desire to do so. The room took on a strangeness, as if the walls and floor were made of taffy, undulating and

shifting along unseen currents. And he felt *them*, those malevolent entities. They were out there, they knew he was here, and they started towards him.

He was here.

He felt the dizziness and fear almost immediately, a feeling of no up, no down, like he was falling in place a million minars an hour. But he had had three prior attempts to prepare him for this sensation, and he battled against it as he focused his mind through the haze, through the cold, through the chilling smell, through the feeling that the whole world was made of tree sap oozing down a branch, and concentrated on the task at hand. The door. He reached out with his senses through the living molasses around him, sending the shadows, sensing, understanding, that the vertigo he was suffering was caused by the fact that some of the shadows around him were in the real world, and some were here in this shadow world. The intersection of the two kinds of shadows were a paradox to his mind, and he couldn't make sense of them, which caused everything around him to seem to swim as if the world were trapped in one of the gelatin dessert treats famous in Alamar. He paused a brief moment, fighting the vertigo, trying to look into it, trying to *feel* the shadows around him, both in the real world and in this world.

The vertigo faded somewhat. He was able to penetrate the undulating curtain with his senses; not sight or smell, but that innate sense of shadow that seemed to be part of the powers that the fox gave him. He focused on that sense, sensing the shadows, and he could feel them, feel them around him, and could feel those that were in the real world...but not with the same precision he usually could when not doing this. He could also feel those *things* getting closer, advancing on him with certain speed, for he could sense them as much as the shadows around him. He separated out the shadows of the real world from this world in his mind, and he could sense them in a way that almost seemed to draw a hazy picture of the *entire plantation*, but those shadows all seemed to be not even past his own elbow.

Another indicator that distances were not the same here as they were in the real world, that in fact there was no distance in here but what he decided

was distance. This world had no rules, no boundaries, except what boundaries were enforced upon it by a sentient mind, which was only natural because a sentient mind defined itself by the boundaries around which it was set.

An epiphany, he realized as he sensed the shadows around him; *there was no distance here*. He could move from a shadow in the Free Territories to a shadow in *Haven*. He would have to learn how to assense the shadows of a place distant from him within the scope of the real world first, but when he figured it out, he'd be able to step through the shadows across half the continent.

But that was something to worry about some other time, for those *things* were getting much closer and much faster, almost as if they had ferreted out his trick and were using their own wills to remove the distance he placed between them. He reached out with his senses and found the shadows in the cellar, just like the other three times, but this time he kept his mind utterly focused on the task. He motioned with an arm and caused a swirling vortex to appear in front of him, the intersection of the shadows of the cellar and the shadows of this world, and then he *pushed* the same way he pushed to get in. He felt the vortex in front of him shift, become a gateway, and he moved to step through it--

And moved not an inch.

Immediately he realized that this place had the same rules for him it did for the shadows. There was no distance here, and that meant that he couldn't physically move so much as he enforced his concept of distance on the world and made the portal move towards him. That was the mistake he made the other times! In this place, one didn't move one's body from one point to the other, the body remained stationary while the entire world moved around it!

Using his control of shadow, he beckoned the gateway as he felt those *things* get very, very close, almost close enough to see, filled with hatred and a hunger, a hunger for his warmth, a warmth that was alien to this

place. The gateway shuddered but didn't move, which surprised him. He instinctively took a step towards the portal, and then it swept forward suddenly to surround him even as he stepped towards it. The cold seemed to waver, the world to his eyes seemed to dim, swirl, and then solidify, and then he felt a sudden urge to breathe.

When the shadows stabilized around him, he was standing in the cellar, in a dark shadow underneath the single tiny window high up on the wall, a cellar filled with brandy casks that were placed on racks spaced evenly across the floor.

He did it!

He jumped to his feet and gave out a joyous cry, pumping his fist in the air, and promptly bashed it against the low roof. He winced and made a hissing sound, then he laughed ruefully as he shook his hand. He did it, and it wasn't even that hard! It only took four tries to figure it out! He quickly centered himself and beckoned to the shadows, and had them converge on him. He again *pushed* into the shadow world, and felt those *things* literally all but on top of him. He ignored it as best he could, moving swiftly, because he felt as if he could almost see one of them as soon as he showed up, and they started moving towards him quickly as soon as he appeared. Since he was very familiar with where he'd just left, he quickly found that spot, beckoned to the shadows there, and had them rise up into the shadowy world and then take him with them when they returned, pushing himself from the shadow world back into the real one. He again moved from that shadowy place filled with chaotic sights and cold and dank smell and the imminent sense that the *things* there were almost within arm's reach of him, back into the real world. It happened with great speed this time, both because of the fear inspired by the proximity of those creatures in the shadow and also because he'd just moved between the same two points just a moment before. With much more speed and surety than the first time, he was again in his dark, bare room, after he stepped through the shadow world and back into the real world.

"Yes!" he shouted in triumph.

But triumph wasn't complete until he could do it without any kind of preparation, when his life may depend on his ability to vanish into the shadow world at the blink of an eye. So, he had won the battle, but he had a lot of work to do to make it as automatic as illusions were now. He knew that even though he'd accomplished, he had shadow walked, he had only scratched the surface of the ability. He could tell from the brief exposure to that world that it had its own rules, and since there was no distance within, he could use that trick to move vast distances in the blink of an eye, but only if he mastered the ability. He had to learn how to sense distant shadows--distant in the real world anyway--and what had to be the ultimate use of the ability, he needed to learn how to surround himself with his own shadow the way the fox could, create her own shadows and use them to enter the shadow world. If he really worked at it, he could find some way to create shadows in the real world from the shadow world and then appear within them, which would let him shadow walk *anywhere*, day or shine, shadow or no shadow. That trick, he knew, would take a long time, because one thing he noticed when he was there in the shadow world was that it was dynamic. Where shadow did not exist, it did not exist in the shadow world, leaving it a broken jumble, like that cheese with holes in it, a landscape filled with voids where there were no shadows in the real world. It was how he imagined it, but that introduced the concept of *distance* into the place, and it had no distance. It had no time. It had nothing but what the conscious mind impressed upon it.

That was what he had to do, he had to master that other world, become as comfortable as possible with it, learn its secrets. That world was the key to this power; the better he understood that other place, the more effective the ability would be.

He was a little wary, though. That second time, those *things* had seemed all but on top of him the instant he shifted into the shadow world. It was a place without distance, but they sure as hell felt like they were only paces away from him, and that proximity had scared him into moving fast. But thank the spirits, he'd not lost his concentration and had managed to move back to the room rather than fall back into the basement. Despite the

fear and the sense of danger, he had maintained his concentration and completed the shadow walk.

She was there. He turned and saw her sitting sedately, her tail wrapped around her legs, but her expression was strange. It was...*prideful*. He knelt down and held out his hand to her, feeling that strange mixture of respect and hatred he had for his spirit, and she placed her large, clawed forepaw in his hand. And in that touch, there was communication. *Well done, my Shaman, she intoned strongly. You accomplished it much faster than I expected. It is not as easy as it appears. Getting out is much harder than getting in, because you must make sense of a world much different from this one. Yet you did so, and very quickly. I am proud of you.*

“Thank you. What are those *things* in there, sister fox?” he asked. “I felt them, and they felt...ominous. I was afraid of them, so I stayed away from them.”

They are the beings of the shadow world, those who call it home. Do not let them catch you, my Shaman. They are attracted to your warmth, and they will kill you should they catch you, they will drain your warmth from you. It is their hunger you sense, and since you are what they seek to eat, your mind comprehends that sensation as fear. It is a healthy fear. I avoid them as well. They are not friends to those who move through their world. Continue to practice, but no more practice today. You are correct in that you have only just touched on the surface of this power, and once you master it, you will be all but unstoppable.

“You told me long ago that my shadow powers would rival my Shaman ability. Now I see why.”

She nodded. *You have within you the power to cross the entire continent in the blink of an eye, penetrate any defense, circumvent any obstacle. With this power, you can literally walk through walls, and be naught but a ghost. When you return to Avannar, they will be defenseless against you. But remember, my Shaman, remember always. Your ability to practice is limited by your ability to avoid them. The more you enter their*

world from a certain place, the closer they will be when you enter again. You cannot stay in one place too long or they will find you, and will literally be there waiting for you should you enter their world again. That is why it is no longer safe to practice today. Those beings within have found where you left their world, and they are waiting there for you to appear again, like a bear at a stream awaiting a fish. They will lurk near your entry point for some time before they give up the hunt and move away. When you practice, limit yourself to only ten walks into the shadow from any one place within the span of a day, and if they get close enough for you to almost feel as if you can see them, then cease practice for the day, for they will be too close to you. Until you gain such a mastery of the power that you can exceed this restriction safely, follow it. Though there may not seem to be time or distance in that world, they do exist. They are only influenced by the conscious mind, who can alter those dimensions as it sees fit when it enters that world. That too attracts the entities, for it is an alteration of their natural state.

“When I managed to walk the first time, I imagined being far away from them before I went in, and it seemed to work.”

It will, temporarily, but they are not mindless, my Shaman. They will learn to see through the trick for what it is. Remember that as you think up ways to deceive them, they will be working to penetrate your deception. They are clever, and they remember tricks you have used in the past. So use deception only when it is needful. Do not let them learn your tricks for keeping them at bay for silly reasons, or they will see through them the one time you can't afford to have it happen. When you have fully mastered this power, they will no longer be as dangerous to you that they are now, but now, as you are learning, is when they pose the greatest threat to you. Even as you learn how to move from place to place through the shadows, work also to understand the shadow world. Your understanding of that world is your protection from those who live within it. When you learn enough, the entities within will only pose a threat to you if you make a mistake.

Remember always, my Shaman, that you enter that world at the risk of death, every time. That is why I am here now, warning you, when usually I

would allow you to learn yourself. I have no use for a Shaman I must coddle, who does not improve himself of his own volition, she sniffed. You have learned how to shadow walk on your own. I would be a poor totem for not explaining to you the dangers now that you have unlocked the power within you. So long as you exercise proper caution, you will master this power safely. Just always keep the danger in the forefront of your mind, my Shaman. This power is the most powerful ability you possess, but it is also the deadliest to you. Mastering it will reduce the danger, but you must face that danger to master it. Do so with care and caution.

“I’ll be careful,” he promised.

As it should be, she intoned calmly, removing her paw from his hand and putting it back on the floor. She regarded him with her glowing emerald eyes for a moment, then she called forth the shadows of the room, and they carried her off into the shadow world.

Well, she wasn’t afraid of those things to use the shadows to leave from the same point where they’d be waiting for her...but then again, she said that those who mastered the power had little to fear from those shadow entities. What did she say exactly? Oh yes, that knowledge of their world was the protection from them. The fox clearly had much more understanding of that shadow world than him, so she was not afraid to enter it all but on top of those malevolent things.

He wanted to practice more, but she had specifically warned him not to do so, and so he would not, both because he respected the danger she was sure to explain to him, and also because she was his totem and she gave him a direct order, and he would not disobey his totem. It was what she expected of him. It took him a while to figure that out, he had to admit. She didn’t expect him to act like anything but himself. He had thought to act like Clover, thinking she was what a Shaman should be, but that was an unwise conclusion. Shaman were individuals, and there was no *one way* to be a Shaman. Even though Stalker and Clover were very different, they were both still Shaman. Stalker was violent and hated humans, Clover was gentle and sweet-natured, but both were still Shaman. Kyven just had to be

himself, act in his own way, make his own decisions and be who he was meant to be. His gained wisdom would change some of his decisions as he learned from his mistakes and became smarter, but it wouldn't change the fundamental nature of who he was, and it was to that nature which he must be true. Sometimes that would put him against his totem, sometimes it would not. He understood that now. Just as she didn't seek his approval, he now understood that *he* didn't have to seek *her* approval. She wanted an independent thinker, someone she could tell what she wanted done and allow him to go about doing it in his own way. As long as the job got done, she didn't *care* how he did it.

That was the crux of it. She wanted *Kyven Steelhammer*, not someone who changed who he was to try to fit into a mold that didn't really suit him. She had taught him how to appreciate other ways of thinking and doing things, through changing him into an Arcan and later as he worked with his illusions, but she still wanted him for who he was. His experience being an Arcan had changed him, he couldn't deny that, but it was a change for the better. He'd walked in both worlds, and it gave him a unique outlook on things. But that was what wisdom was all about, he supposed, to see through opened eyes, to learn, to understand, and to allow that understanding to influence one's actions in the future. All he had to be was himself, and learn how being a Shaman changed Kyven Steelhammer, not to change Kyven Steelhammer because he wanted to be a Shaman.

It was an esoteric, ethereal concept, but maybe that was one of the things that wisdom was supposed to give a man. The ability to make such delicate distinctions.

Or maybe he was just full of shit, who knew.

He left the little room and was almost knocked down by Clover. She clung to him and slurped her tongue from his chin to his forehead, which made him laugh. "I felt her in there," she told him. "Did you make progress?"

"I pulled it off," he grinned. "*Twice.*"

“You did? Good job!” she congratulated, licking his cheek. “Is that why she came?”

He shook his head and pushed out of her arms enough to cross the hall to his room, where his clothes were laid out on the bed. He had no idea if clothes could go when he did that, so he’d decided to err on the side of caution while trying to learn how to do it. Tomorrow, however, he’d try it with clothes on, just to see what happened. “It turns out it’s actually quite dangerous,” he told Clover, explaining about the entities within the shadow world as he dressed. “The shadow fox warned me to be very careful while practicing, and never try to shadow walk from the same place too many times or they’d find where I was coming in and out and ambush me the instant I showed up on the other side.”

“A sensible warning,” she nodded, sitting on the bed as he sat down to pull on his boots. “Did you see one of them?”

“No, but I felt like it was right on top of me the second time I did it, like I could have punched it in the nose before I got through,” he answered. “It scared the piss out of me. I managed to finish the walk, though.”

“A wise man can fear without being ruled by it,” she said sagely.

“So can a wise coyote,” he said with a slight smile as he stood up and pulled on his shirt, then buttoned it up. “Any word on the rifles?”

She shook her head. “Nothing yet. But since we have heard nothing, that means the Loreguard haven’t found them either.”

“How are they getting here?”

“Wagons,” she answered. “There are ten wagons holding the cases and supplies that go with them, moving along the country lanes and along some old trails wide enough for wagons that only locals know. But, since this is my territory, I know them. I gave the drivers very detailed maps. They should get here any time now, and won’t pass through a single village.”

“So, you knew about this before I did.”

“I only knew where they wanted the rifles to go,” she said. “I and I got word of it the day we attacked the ship.”

“I wonder why the council didn’t call up Danvers to lead the Arcans,” Kyven mused as Clover stood up and they walked out of his room. “He has much more experience than Danna, and he could have built a very good army.”

“He would have said no,” she answered immediately. “He *has* said no in the past to similar offers, offers to organize a guerilla army of the Masked. After spending so many years moving, he wanted to stay in one place, my brother, but he does help in one way by teaching members of the Masked about fighting, they just have to come here. Besides, the *spirits* demanded Danna. They see something in her we do not. We must accede to their wisdom, for it is greater than ours.”

“But he’ll be moving again,” Kyven grunted as they came to the stairs. “I guess he can’t ignore how serious it is now.”

“No,” she said. “I’ve known him for three years, my brother, and he’s very worried. Not just at what we have to do, but at what is happening. He told me at breakfast that he sees the entire continent at war within the year. When Flaur attacks the Loremasters, and word gets out as to exactly why they’re attacking, it will be the torch thrown into the powder magazine.”

“Just more substantiation of what we told you, Clover.”

She nodded soberly. “I can say I fully believe you now, brother. But it’s not easy. I’ve been around humans most of my life, but sometimes I just don’t understand them.”

“We don’t even understand ourselves,” he said self-deprecatingly. “Arcans are much easier to understand. They’re simple, but complex at the same time.”

They stepped out onto the back porch, where Danvers was sitting at a round table with a cup of what looked like coffee before him, reading from a book. Out in the back yard, Lightfoot was with Lucky, and she was

“teaching” him how to fight. In reality, she was systematically beating him senseless. Lucky professed interest in learning how to fight, how to be a fighting Arcan, and Lightfoot rather reluctantly agreed to show him what it was about. Lucky had absolutely no training at all, but what he did have was amazingly fast reflexes, and that was the only reason he could last more than three seconds against the lithe, dangerous little cat. This was his second day of lessons, and the only thing he’d managed so far was to learn how avoid Lightfoot’s flashing claws and her feet for more than ten seconds before she put him on his butt. Kyven remembered his own training with her, where she taught him the basics of unarmed combat so he could protect himself in an emergency, and she showed little mercy on him either. Even after that training, Kyven could admit that he wasn’t very good at hand to hand fighting. He could be with more training and practice, but as it was now all he could do was attack someone by surprise and take them down or defeat someone as inexperienced as he was. If he came up against someone experienced in close fighting, odds were he’d lose. Kyven’s strength was in either striking from ambush or fighting at range, and in those cases, he was very good.

“Enjoying the show, General?” Kyven asked with a chuckle as he leaned against the table.

“Such as it is,” he answered. “Did your practice go well?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, General. I managed to do what I was trying to do. But I’m done practicing for today.”

“Good, you’ve been cooped up in that room for far too long, and you look like you could use a little rest. I received word over my relay, Clover. The rifles will arrive sometime early tomorrow morning.”

“Good, good,” she nodded.

“Kyven, I hate to intrude on your practice, but I’ll need your help teaching the men how to use them,” he said. “All they’ve ever handled are breech loading muskets. I’ve handled a Briton rifle before, but I’m just one

man, and Clover told me you are quite a good shot with a Briton rifle. With two of us training the men, it will go faster.”

“I’ve been taught how to use them, I can do it,” he assured the older man.

“I’m going to give us two days to teach the men how to use the rifles, then we move,” he said, picking up his cup of coffee. “I shouldn’t even waste that time, but we can’t possibly train the men on the move.”

“Have you got enough horses?”

He nodded. “They’ve about denuded the valley and hill of grass, and it’s getting hard to keep them a secret,” he answered. “Three thousand and more horses aren’t easy to conceal.”

“You know we’re going to be spotted moving.”

“There’s no helping it, but Clover’s knowledge of the back roads of the territories should minimize our contact with the civilians,” he answered. “She’ll be our guide out there.”

“Easily done, my friend,” she assured him. “Are the logistics secure?”

“We have enough supplies to get to Riyan, and have two days afterwards,” he answered. “We’ll have to forage from there, but since we’ll be moving openly, we can raid for it.”

“Raid?”

“We’ll be freeing Arcans on the way, so we’ll raid the plantations and farms for food as well. We won’t be burning them out or taking everything, but three thousand men and however many Arcans we have won’t be easy to feed. We’ll be forced to take it from the citizens as we move south.”

“I just hope it won’t turn into some kind of rolling atrocity,” Kyven fretted.

“My men are disciplined, Kyven,” Danvers assured him. “And the civilians aren’t our enemies. Yes, we’re going to take from them, but there

will be no looting, no pillaging, no hurting the civilians, and we won't leave them starving themselves. We'll just raid for what we need. Oh, Kyven, I'll have that layout for you by tonight. I have a man in Riyan scouting, and he'll send his report this evening."

"I'll need it," Kyven noted. "I need to know exactly where they're keeping the Arcans and what kind of protection they have around them."

"My man is very good, my friend, I'm sure the report will be very detailed, and will undoubtedly include maps."

"The more detailed it is, the easier it'll be."

They heard Lucky yelp, and saw him on his belly on the ground, Lightfoot sitting negligently across his shoulders, his tail firmly gripped in her hand. "That little cat of yours is very good, Shaman," Danvers noted. "She could fight almost anyone I know toe to toe."

"You should see her shoot a pistol, General," Clover chuckled. "She's a deadly shot. I have never known her to miss."

"I wonder how she'd handle those new repeating revolvers," Danvers mused. "Have you seen them?"

Clover nodded. "I've seen them."

"What is that?" Kyven asked.

"It's a pistol with a revolving cylinder that has six chambers. You load each chamber, and the pistol's workings advances the cylinder to line it up under the hammer as you cock it."

"It uses the brass cartridges like the Briton rifles?"

Danvers shook his head. "You have to load each cylinder, but it does give you six shots instead of just one or two like with normal pistols. I've heard the Britons have pistols that do use cartridges, and fire as fast as you can pull the trigger."

"Huh, I'd like to see one of those," Kyven mused.

“You may get your chance, given we intercepted the rifles. The Loreguard has been trying to get the new revolver pistols in numbers to replace the breech loading pistols they use now. But most of the higher-ranking officers are carrying them. No doubt loaded with black crystal shot,” he frowned.

“They have to hit me first, General,” Kyven chuckled. “And that’s not easy in the dark.”

“They only have to nick you, Kyven, and that means they can get lucky.”

“Trust me, General. I’ll be very careful.”

“He’d better. I only have one human brother, and I won’t lose him to his own overconfidence,” Clover noted, poking Kyven in the side.

“I still can’t quite get used to that idea,” Danvers admitted with a chuckle as Lucky and Lightfoot squared off again, but it only lasted about four seconds. Lucky tried to grab Lightfoot’s paw, but she intercepted him, knocked him off his feet, and put a foot on his neck deliberately, giving him a cool, unpleasant look and chiding him in a low voice for being foolish. “But then again, I’ve gotten used to quite a few things since I took this job.”

“You never did tell me why,” Kyven said.

“Simple, my young Shaman,” he said, motioning before him. Kyven and Clover sat down, and Missy, Danvers’ canine house servant, brought out two cups of coffee for the Shaman with a low bow and adoring eyes. “It started at the Balton rebellion,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “I was stationed in Balton then, just a Colonel, and our unit was the only one close enough to intercept the Arcans. We got intelligence from ahead of them that let us intercept them, and we found that they outnumbered us nearly four to one. But they had no weapons, just farm tools, and my men had muskets and shockrods.

“We set up at a bridge over a river so their numbers were countered, and we dug in. With us commanding the bridge, they couldn’t come at us

any way where we couldn't see them coming, they had no room to maneuver, or they'd be going so slow that we'd have time to take them out. I fully expected them to try to pass us by and swim the river out of musket range, which was only the smart thing to do, which would have given us time to get to that point and fire on them before they could reach our side of the river. But I was rather stunned when nearly a quarter of them charged us from the woods. Given we were on the far side of the bridge, it's fairly predictable what happened next. None of them made it to our position. But then another wave of them charged, and they were killed as well. After the second wave, a third wave charged before we could reload muskets, but they stopped just outside of shockrod range and then retreated, getting back into the forest before we had enough muskets loaded to volley. Needless to say, their suicidal charges and then the sudden retreat had me a little confused, but that was only until a kerchief floated down the river. That's when I realized that the Arcans who attacked us were nothing but a diversion. Their intent had been to pin my men down at that bridge and occupy us while others went upriver and forded it. They had given their lives to give the others time to escape, because they *did* go somewhere else and ford the river.

“Contrary to popular belief, there was no slaughter to the last Arcan at Balton,” he said calmly. “The truth is, half of them escaped, mostly females and children, because that last wave of Arcans attacked just as we started to separate so some of the men could chase after those that got past us,” he grunted. “They timed it perfectly. Just as the men started to redeploy, they charged out of the forest. It only took my men a moment to reset to volley on the Arcans, but that moment was all they needed. The trail end of the attackers managed to get into the formation before we could kill them all. Seven Arcans made it to the lines, Shaman, and those seven Arcans killed fifty-four men before they were taken out. At that time, infantry weren't issued pistols, a policy that changed quickly after Balton, and at that range shockrods would kill our own men. So my men had to fight off Arcans armed with farm tools using bayonets. I'd never seen anything like it,” he said in a grim, musing voice. “I never believed that untrained animals could be so deadly. But they were. They got among us, and they killed us like a

farmer harvesting wheat. I saw one chop a man in half with a wide-bladed axe,” he said with a shudder. “You never appreciate how strong Arcans are until you see them use that strength. Anyway, after we defeated the Arcans that stayed behind, we couldn’t catch up to the others. I had wounded men to see to and they had too much of a head start, so I decided to pull back to Balton. So we sent word ahead and returned to Balton, but I spent the entire return trip trying to make sense of what they did. What they did troubled me. What they did, some sacrificing themselves to give others time to escape, that is *not* the behavior of simple animals, even if they are smart animals. When I reported what happened to my superiors, they simply spread the story that the Arcans were wiped out, and covered up the activity further west as those females and children moved across Malan, then vanished into the Smoke Mountains north of Two River. I was promoted, told to keep my mouth shut, and play the role of hero.”

He took another sip of his coffee. “But I never forgot what I saw that day. What those Arcans did was the highest form of nobility, Shaman. Some of them charged straight into death to give others a chance to escape, and I could not fathom how *animals* could do such a thing. Mothers will often fight to protect their cubs, animals will fight to defend their territory, but these were all escaped Arcans who barely knew each other, yet some had willingly died to give others a chance to be free. It bothered me for years, and I quietly investigated the Arcans myself. I wanted to see if those I fought at Balton were the exception or the rule. I bought Arcans and talked to them, I quietly searched through records at headquarters over Arcan activities, and I investigated the Shaman. What I found out was, Arcans are not animals. They are *people*, just like us, and while they look very different from us, and have different views about things, they are just as intelligent and capable of emotion as we. That was when I realized that we are enslaving *people*, not animals, and I was horrified. I resigned immediately, but the Loreguard said I’d put in enough time, so they retired me and pensioned me instead...also to maintain the image of General Wilson Danvers, the hero of Balton,” he said scathingly. “But, thankfully, I retired on good terms with some people still in the Loreguard, and they pass on information to me from time to time. Us Generals, we all know each other,

you see,” he said with another sip of coffee. “A General would tell another General something he’d never tell another man, which is how I was able to find out what I know about Riyan. In reality, Generals gossip worse than any maid ever did,” he chuckled.

“It was during my search for the true nature of the Arcans that the Masked took notice of me. After I retired, they approached me, and I joined them. I took the money I was given for pension and some money they supplied me and I bought this plantation, which is a critical stop along the Freedom Trail. More Arcans move through my plantation than any other stop in the Free Territories,” he said proudly.

“And that’s why infantry now carries pistols,” Kyven mused. “Because your fight with the Arcans showed the Loreguard they were no match for Arcans in hand to hand combat.”

“Pistols and impact rods,” Danvers nodded. Kyven knew what those were, since he’d taken them off Loreguard before. They were black metal rods which were alchemical, and their purpose was to strike with magically augmented force. A child armed with an impact rod could crush the skull of a bear with a solid hit, though the recoil might well break the child’s arm. Some men called them Bashers or Beatsticks, but the ones that earned that name were the ones whose impact was much lighter, allowing them to be used in a non-lethal manner, dishing out blows with stunning force rather than lethal force. There were even versions of impact rods which could be changed from the lower, non-lethal mode to the killing mode with a flick of a switch on the base of the rod. At the low setting, a blow from an impact rod could stun. At the high setting, the same blow would kill, or at the very least shatter every bone under where the rod struck. Impact rods weren’t very common outside of the Loreguard, though the occasional bartender might keep one of the non-lethal versions of one under his bar to maintain order. The Loreguard in Avannar carried them as non-lethal weapons against rowdy drunks and hard cases, but the cavalry Loreguard he’d killed to take their horses had not been carrying them. Then again, a cavalry man didn’t need an impact rod when he had a horse. They used swords instead, which were more effective from horseback than an impact rod due to the

fact that the impact rod pushed back against the user. A man leaning over in his saddle doesn't cater well to being knocked backwards.

"And now your calico friend wants to learn to fight," Danvers noted, motioning at the scrap before them.

"I think he only wants to learn to fight so he can get time with Lightfoot," Clover said lightly.

"A very serious young Arcan," Danvers noted. "And a damn good fighter."

"Trained by former pen fighters," Clover told him. "The fighting Arcans that reach us from the fighting pens contribute by teaching the young ones how to fight. Lightfoot is good with her hands, but she's even more dangerous with a pistol."

"Well, your calico, Lucky, will be good. He has fast hands and he's quick. But he'd be better suited to a rifle than balling his fists." He looked to Kyven. "Clover says you're the best knife thrower she's ever seen, Shaman."

"A youth wasted at the posts board, General," he said lightly.

Danvers laughed. "I have a posts board, you know. You have a set?"

"Not one I've tried out yet. I picked up an old used set a few villages ago. They were a bit worn, but well made. An old posts vulture like me just doesn't feel right if he doesn't have a set handy."

"Well, we should give you the chance to break it in. And I think you could use a break. You've been in that room for two days."

"I think I could."

The posts boards were outside, nailed to the side of the carriage house, and they showed signs of heavy use; clearly, posts was a hobby of the overseers. Kyven found out quickly that Danvers was no slouch at posts. He was easily as good as Kyven or Timble, and Kyven found the challenge

refreshing as he broke in the set of used posts knives he'd bought with the rest of his gear. "If I might ask, what have you been working on in that room, Kyven?" he asked.

"I've been trying to master a very difficult trick where I vanish from within one shadow, and reappear in another shadow in a different location."

Danvers almost missed the entire posts board, giving Kyven a wild look. "Are you serious?" he asked.

Kyven nodded. "I've managed to accomplish it twice, moving from my room to the cellar, and then back again. But it's very difficult, and it's not entirely safe to do."

"I should say so. Teleportation would be very dangerous, I imagine. After all, how can you see where you're going?"

"What?"

"Teleportation. It's in some old stories, a magician vanishing from one place and reappearing instantly somewhere else."

"Ah. Well, my totem calls it shadow walking, because the shadows are something like a bridge between where I start and where I finish. I sort of walk through them and appear where I'm going. It's not vanishing and reappearing more than stepping through a door between where I am and where I'm going."

"Ah. Can you take others with you?"

"You know...yes, actually. My spirit once carried me through, so it stands to reason I could carry someone else. But I won't try that until I fully master the power. Doing it is very dangerous, General, and I won't expose anyone to that kind of risk until I can do it safely."

"I might be tempted to have you take me someday." He threw his last knife, then went down to get them and tally.

“You wouldn’t like it, General,” Kyven told him. “The shadow world is a cold, frightening, hostile place filled with things that would eat me if they could catch me. That’s the danger involved. There’s no time inside that place, so what looks instant out here actually takes time in there, and that’s when those things in there try to hunt me down and kill me.”

Danvers gave him a long, searching look. “And yet you intend to master this power?”

“The advantages are worth the risk,” he shrugged as he took his place at the line. “Once I master the power, nobody can stop me. I’ll be able to get past guards, through locked doors, even cross hundreds of minars in the blink of an eye. When I master it, I’ll go back to Avannar and go through the Loremasters’ building from top to bottom and ferret out every secret they have, which will make it much easier for the Arcans and everyone opposing them. That’s what I was trained to do, General. I’m a spy and an assassin when needs be, and mastering this power will make my job much easier.”

“More the spy than the assassin, from the sound of it.”

Kyven nodded. “My totem only kills as a last resort. She’s a being of guile and deceit, who prefers to trick or talk her way out of situations rather than fight. We share that sentiment. I don’t like to kill, but I will when I have to.”

“Then you’re the best kind of man to make that kind of decision, my friend. No man should be given any kind of power that feels no remorse for the lives he takes.”

“Sounds like you’re the kind of man that remembers the name of every man who died under his command.”

“Sixty-two, my friend. I remember their names, families, where they lived, their personal histories, and I still write to their wives or parents on the anniversary of their deaths,” he sighed sadly. “They were good boys, all of them, and it’s a shame they had to die so young.”

“I think I could learn to like you, General,” Kyven said calmly as he threw his first knife.

Danvers accepted Kyven by rote because he was a Shaman, and therefore an ally. But Danvers’ troops, on the other hand, weren’t quite so quick to accept him, and showed Kyven some of the dangers that being a Shaman might entail.

The rifles arrived almost exactly as Danvers predicted, early the next morning as the still doe-eyed Missy served them breakfast. She was almost awed to be in the presence of Shaman, and all but fell over herself to see to their every need or want. Clover had told him she had always been like that, and accepted the attention with her usual calm smile and nod. But the rifles arrived, and Kyven and Danvers rode with the lead wagon out to the troop encampment. It was a grassy valley about two minars from the edge of Danvers’ plantation, a large, wide valley nearly five minars long with a hastily built fence around the northern end that held a few thousand horses, and rows and rows of tents to the south backed by a large number of supply wagons. An army may be made up of men, but it was the food and supplies that made it go, and Danvers clearly understood that. There were dozens and dozens of wagons lined up with nearly military precision not far from the fence, and there were more of them lined up behind the tents to form a barrier of sorts, for it looked like behind the wagons, the men trained in the large open field with a gentle slope up to the forest.

There were over three thousand men here, and they were not kids. These were lean, hard, tough men, professional fighting men, possessed of no standard uniform. Some men wore cotton shirts and blue denim trousers. Some wore hardened leather tunics to form as a sort of armor, and some wore buckskins. But all of them, every one, had at the very least a musket, a pistol, and some kind of alchemical weapon or sword for hand to hand combat. One dangerous looking fellow Kyven saw had two pistols in his belt, two knives behind them, a knife in each boot, and the hilt of either a large knife or small sword jutted up over his left shoulder. There were very

few Arcans here, and Kyven recognized one from the plantation, who was helping cook breakfast at one of the many fires. That Arcan, a willowy male feline with tawny fur, was the one that let it slip as to just what Kyven was. Every Arcan on the plantation knew Kyven was a Shaman, and Kyven wasn't exactly hiding the fact anymore either. But, as the men helped unload, the feline came up to him as he and a thin dark-haired man with a scar on his cheek handed off a heavy crate of rifles to two other men. "I'll be returning to the farm, General," the feline said.

"That's fine, Gold."

"Will you bless me, Shaman?" the feline asked, holding his hands out towards Kyven.

"Of course," he answered with a smile, taking one of Gold's hands and putting the other on his shoulder. He recited the ritual benediction, which made the tawny cat smile, lean forward and nuzzle Kyven's neck with the side of his muzzle, then he turned, dropped to all fours, and loped off towards the farm some two minars away.

When he looked back at the soldiers, he was confronted with dozens of surprised and slightly suspicious expressions. "You didn't say nothin' about working with a fuckin' *Shaman*, Danvers," the closest man growled.

"I told you the Arcans would help in any way they could, Captain. Do you think they wouldn't send a Shaman?"

"He's human," another man said.

Kyven nodded. "I'm a human Shaman," he said simply.

"Bullshit!" someone else called. But then there were nothing but gasps and stares when he opened his eyes to the spirits and let them see his glowing emerald eyes.

"Well stay the fuck away from me," the captain snapped, taking an aggressive step forward. "I don't want no stinkin' filthy Trinity-cursed Shaman anywhere near me."

“Given that he’s the one that’s going to train you in the use of Briton rifles, that may not be easy, Captain,” Danvers said dryly.

The captain glared at Kyven darkly, then turned and stalked away.

That one fact made Kyven very unpopular among the men. They all stared at him, gave him dark looks, or just outright avoided him. When it came time for them to learn about the rifles, though, they showed they were professional enough to listen to him as he explained how they worked. A couple of them gave him slightly approving looks when he fired one for them, hitting a target set up that was far out of musket range in quick succession with four bullets, and they paid close attention when it came time for them to learn how to load, unload, and clean the rifles. Kyven taught them in groups of twenty all through the day, and though most of them glared at him, they didn’t put up their noses at what he had to teach.

It worked fairly well. The Briton rifles were actually *extremely* easy to use, and these men all had extensive experience with using muskets. The rifles were very easy to load, easy to clean, easy to check for a problem in the action, and could be field stripped into the ten pieces that made up the action in about a minute, which made them very easy for an experienced gunsmith to check for problems if one misfired or broke. Each group of twenty, after they mastered the idea of it over the course of an hour, then broke up to train another group of twenty themselves, which allowed the training to sweep through the army very quickly.

It wouldn’t have been that easy had it been a more complicated weapon and these men didn’t already have experience using muskets. Every man Kyven taught grasped the idea of the cartridges quickly, and the questions they asked were professional and to the point. He did, however, have to tolerate a number of men making whispered comments that were just out of his ability to hear, but he ignored them. But the men, almost to a man, did not like him, did not like him one bit. It may have been because he was Shaman, but the looks in their eyes were more because he was a *human* Shaman. That seemed to shock and violate them, that a human had become something...*Arcan*.

By sunset, when the men were settling down with dinner, it all came out into the open. A very large, burly man with black hair got right in front of him and blocked his way. “They say you’re a Shaman,” he said in an aggressive manner.

“I am,” Kyven answered simply.

“Ain’t no human can be a Shaman,” the big man snarled. “That makes you a liar.”

Opening his eyes to the spirits, Kyven held out a single finger, a finger that had a lick of flame appear over it. “Does that answer your question?”

“Well then, that makes you a devil,” the man growled, taking a fearful step back.

“You’re here to fight the Loremasters, soldier. Upholding their beliefs defeats the purpose,” Kyven told him calmly, looking up at him. “What the Loremasters say about the Shaman is a lie. I know, I’ve seen the truth with my own eyes. I used to believe it too, but then I found out I’m a Shaman, and then I learned the truth personally. Shaman don’t serve demons or evil spirits. The spirits the Shaman serve are just as worried about the humans as they are the Arcans. I won’t be the only human Shaman, or the last. The humans need the spirits, because the Loremasters have corrupted them into believing in something that will destroy the entire civilization of Noraam and kill untold thousands of Arcans.”

“I’m here because I’m being paid,” one man said bluntly.

“Then do your job,” Kyven said to him. “You may not like me, but I’ll be fighting with you, and I’ll be fighting *for* you. We don’t have to like each other to do our jobs.”

“I don’t want your dirty magic anywhere near me,” the big man grated.

“It won’t be,” Kyven shrugged. “But when the fat’s in the fire, I doubt you’ll be very picky.”

The man's face turned ugly, and he took a swing at him. Lightfoot's training took over at that moment. He'd never be the fighter that Lightfoot was, but he saw the punch coming, and Kyven had fast reflexes. He leaned out of the path of the punch, then took a couple of steps back. "Woah! Calm down there, hoss!" Kyven barked. He evaded a few more punches, then danced back to put a campfire between him and the big man, while the other men just moved back and watched.

"What, you gonna magic me like a damned little bitch coward?" the big man sneered. "Can't fight without your dirty magic, can you?"

"I'm not a fighter, my big friend," Kyven said lightly. "I leave that job for people better suited for it. My area of expertise is trickery," he said, making a gesture towards the man as he channeled a spell of illusion. The illusion wrapped around the man, and made it appear to the men at the campfire that he was wearing a low-cut dress that a prostitute might wear, with a low neckline, with abundant amounts of short, curly hair peeking out from the neckline and bust.

A couple of men actually snorted out a laugh at the sight.

The big man couldn't see the illusion, and he gave one of the laughing men a dark look. That distraction was all it took, however. With blazing speed, Kyven's foot hooked under a rifle laying near the campfire, kicked it up into his hands, and then he worked the lever and brought it up to his shoulder, leveling it at the big man, who suddenly looked wary and nervous. "Like I said, I'm a trickster, my big friend," he said in a calm yet serious voice. "And I follow only one rule when it comes to fighting. Win. By any means necessary, because I for damn sure don't care if you think I'm a coward or not. You don't like me. I can accept that. But when the chits are on the table and the hands are being counted, you'd better make sure you're doing your job, because I'll be doing mine. And if you didn't know, my job is to make sure *your* job is as easy and safe as possible. While you boys are waiting outside, I'm the one that's going to be going into Riyan, alone, and putting myself in jeopardy to make sure you boys are safe by getting the Arcans ready to move and eliminating any threats to you boys that I see

while doing it. That's what I do, and forgive me if I sound brash, but I'm good at it. I'm a spy, my big friend, and I'm willing to put myself at great risk if it means keeping the rest of you alive. Are *you* willing to do something like that?"

The big man just stared at him.

"Then never call me a coward again," he said, lowering the rifle and tossing it to the nearest man. "And never throw a punch at me again either, or I'll do something to you that you'll never forget."

"Damn dirty *Shaman*," the man spat.

"I am a Shaman," Kyven declared proudly. "And someday, you'll understand what that means."

He returned to the plantation house to a thick packet of papers, which were the reports sent from Riyan. Together with Lightfoot, Clover, Danvers, and Lucky, they sat down and pored over them. The Arcans numbered over a thousand, the closest estimate was around 1400 of them, and they were being held more or less as Danvers expected. They were in a camp on the southwestern side of Riyan, guarded almost negligently by about 20 men, being kept in a camp dedicated only to them...a camp with no tents, no bedrolls, just 1400 Arcans being kept inside a rail fence and left exposed to the weather. The problem wasn't how they were being held, the problem was that the Arcan pen was literally surrounded by tent cities of soldiers on both the south and the west, with the city to the north and east. Getting to the Arcans wouldn't be hard, and eliminating their immediate overseers also wouldn't be difficult. The problem was, to get them out, they'd have to go through some 500 soldiers no matter which way they went. There were, total, about 20,000 Loreguard soldiers camped in and around Riyan, which would make some kind of diversion dicey. With that many men, if Danvers attacked the east side of town, they'd be outnumbered in a matter of minutes.

But that was exactly what Danvers decided to do. "We can pull those men out of the tents and to the east," he declared, pointing at the

southeastern corner of Riyan. “Here. There are only about two hundred men camped around these warehouses, and the warehouses themselves conceal the area from the rest of the city. The river cuts the city in half, so it cuts the Loreguard off from those camped on the north bank. We strike at this point, and that will pull the men from the tents on the west side. I’ll have a small support force there to cover you as you bring the Arcans out. We’ll hit those men and torch the warehouses.”

“Seems dangerous, but I don’t see an easier way,” Kyven sighed. “I’m going to need a head start on the army, General. Draining that many collars is going to take some time, and the army can’t just sit around and wait for me to do it. We can just decide on when you’re going to attack, and I’ll make sure the Arcans are ready by then.”

“How long do you need?”

“For that many collars? A few hours minimum. I can’t just line them up and walk down the line or the guards will get suspicious. I’ll have to mill around with them and do it that way, and that means I’ll have to chase down the last stragglers.”

“The advantage of it is the guards won’t know the collars are drained unless they take one off an Arcan,” Clover added. “Kyven can infiltrate early and have time to move through the Arcans, draining their collars and getting them ready to move.”

“I can get there in two days,” Kyven told the General. “The army won’t move as fast as I do. So we just decide on a time when you attack, and I’ll have the Arcans ready.”

“Not alone,” Lightfoot growled. “I go.”

“I could use help spreading the word among the Arcans,” he nodded.

“Then three’s a good number,” Lucky declared.

“No, Lucky, you’ll stay with Clover. You’re not quite ready to start doing the heavy lifting yet, but it won’t be too long,” he smiled.

“Aww,” the calico frowned.

“Just be patient, young one,” Clover told him. “You need more time yet before you are ready.”

“Don’t complain,” Lightfoot said to him directly as he was about to retort, and he clamped his muzzle shut and looked at the map.

“I’ll help you finish teaching the men how to use the rifles and we’ll leave early tomorrow morning,” Kyven told him. “Me and Lightfoot will be moving much faster than the army, and moving in a straight line. I’m going to need a dud collar for her,” he added. “That way we can just go right up the main roads without attracting attention.”

“I have plenty,” Danvers assured him. “If it’s going to take you two days to get there and more time to drain the collars, let’s call it four days to factor in unforeseen circumstances. How long will it take a column of mounted men and wagons to reach Riyan along the untraveled paths, Clover?”

“Four days,” she answered confidently. “If you leave in the morning, you’ll arrive around noon four days later. We’re assuming there are no problems with the wagons, and they move at a fairly decent rate.”

“That fits almost perfectly,” Danvers noted, scratching his chin. “We’ll attack the second hour after midnight. That gives us time to rest before the race south, then get into position. The main force will attack the warehouses, but I’ll have two hundred men picketed here, along this ridge,” he added, pointing it out on the map to Kyven. “They’ll cover the Arcans as they escape. We’ll pull back and rendezvous here,” he tapped the map. “Where these two lanes intersect Tobacco Road. After that, we run like hell using the road until we get to Peteburrough, then strike out due south as the road turns west. We can skirt the Reed Lake to the east, I know a path through the marshlands down there that will save us some time.”

“Sounds like a plan. So, the night after four days, we should expect you to attack?”

“Two hours after midnight, on the tick,” he nodded. “That should give you a full day to infiltrate Riyan, drain the collars, and get the Arcans ready to run. You’ll probably need every minute.”

“I’m more worried about the Arcans than anything else,” Kyven grunted. “All it takes is one Arcan too much the slave to run to the Loreguard, and we’re in trouble.”

“I doubt they’d do that.”

“When I freed a group of Arcans from a ship and ran it aground, General, some of the Arcans just sat down on the beach and waited for the hunters to come,” Kyven said seriously. “There are some Arcans who have been all but beaten into believing what the humans say. They’re so used to being slaves they’re afraid to think of being anything else.”

“Well, you might have to do something about that, my friend,” Danvers said soberly.

“I know,” he said with a dark frown.

They finalized the plans with about two more hours of discussion, and then broke up for dinner. After dinner, Kyven returned to his dark room to practice. He found it much easier to enter the shadow world, but the fox was right that the things in there got closer and closer to him as he moved in and out, as they seemed to sense him and moved towards him. He spent his time studying the shadowy world, for that was the key to mastering the power. If he wanted to walk far, he had to be able to sense the shadows where he wanted to arrive and form a gateway out of them, so he stayed in the shadow world as long as he possibly could, seeing how far he could extend his senses, trying to understand the alternate reality of the shadow world. The fox had affirmed his own suspicions that this shadowy world would conform itself to his intent, and he used that to try to stave off the things inside, “stretching” out the distance between him and them even as they tried to reach him, but found little success in that trick. They seemed to understand what he was doing and circumvented his efforts, which

eventually forced him back into the real world, where he would have to stay for a while until those things moved on.

The next day was nearly as unpleasant as the last. The soldiers of Danvers' army let him teach them, but they obviously didn't like him, didn't like what he was. He spent the day speaking in calm, direct words, just training the men in how the rifle was loaded, checked, fired, and cleaned. There wasn't any friendly banter, even among the men, there was nothing that even hinted in any way that they wanted anything to do with him outside of what he could teach them. But if they thought it bothered him, they had no idea. He simply brushed the men off, for it was too much of an effort to try to talk them out of their prejudice. He'd let his actions speak for him, for actions were always bigger than words. By early afternoon, thanks to the efforts of the men to teach each other, all the men had a working knowledge of the Briton rifles, and could load, shoot, unload, and clean them...and if it wasn't for the fact that the rifles were so easy to use, it would have taken much, much longer. It was as simple as thumb in cartridges, jack the lever, pull the trigger. The biggest thing the men had to learn was how to aim using the sights, and how to clean the weapons, since unloading it was accomplished by simply working the lever holding the rifle sideways without pulling the trigger, which caused the unfired round to fall from the same chamber where the empty shell was ejected when the rifle was fired and reloaded.

While the men moved the unused rifles and supplies to the wagons and prepared to move out, Kyven returned to the house to practice again with his shadow walking. He again focused on getting used to the feel of the shadow world, trying to conquer the vertigo and the strange sensations, trying to acclimate himself to that place at the same time as he tried to extend his senses into the place. He again only had a short amount of time to study the place and get used to it, for the *things* in there started searching for him as soon as he entered, and they inexorable got closer and closer to him as he studied the shadow world and extended his senses to detect shadows further and further away. He spent nearly ten minutes in the shadow world before the imminent proximity of those creatures forced him

out, and he knew that they were too close for him to risk going back in again. Like a fox standing over a rabbit hole, they were just waiting for him to show his face in order to bite it off.

Lightfoot woke him up well before dawn, a hand on his shoulder shaking him. “What?” he asked sleepily, yawning.

“It’s time,” she said, then turned and stalked out of the room on all fours.

He shook off his sleepiness and got dressed, a simple buckskin jacket over a light cotton shirt and rugged denim trousers, their dark blue already starting to fade. These denim pants were becoming very popular because the fabric, made from cotton, was light and comfortable, yet extremely strong, very rugged and resistant to tearing. He packed a small pack and filled his saddlebags, paused for a quick breakfast down in the kitchen, and then went up to wake up Clover, who was sleeping with Lucky. “Sister, I’m on my way,” he said gently.

She yawned and looked up at him with her amber eyes, and nodded. “You will be very careful, my brother,” she told him, reaching out and taking his hand. “If you get yourself killed, I’ll never forgive you.”

He smiled, then leaned down and kissed her on the nose. “Take good care of Lucky while I’m gone.”

“At least he’s not as, enthusiastic, as Tweak,” she noted, which made Kyven chuckle. “I’ll see you in five days, my brother. Keep each other safe.”

“We will, I promise,” he told her, patting her on the shoulder, then he let her go back to sleep.

Lightfoot looked very annoyed when, instead of running, he instead had his roan saddled and rode it out of the livery. “I don’t have Arcan legs anymore, Lightfoot, I can’t run half as fast now as I could before,” he chuckled. “And besides, this horse makes me much more invisible. A man

running down the road on foot attracts far more attention than a lone man trotting down the road on a horse.”

“Foolishness,” she snorted, putting on the fake collar Danvers had given him.

“Belt,” he ordered, leaning down in the saddle and holding out his hand.

Lightfoot gave him a dark look, then unbuckled the belt holding her pistol and shockrod, then handed it to him. He hung it from his saddle, which put the weapons in convenient reach for Lightfoot if she was beside the horse. Seeing Lightfoot out of that belt had not lost its impact on him, and he had to give her a long, assessing stare that she didn’t miss. She smiled just slightly. “Pervert.”

Kyven laughed. “I’m still me, it’s just the outside that changed,” he grinned.

“Let’s go.”

Lightfoot was a very quiet, reserved person, and traveling alone with her was no different. She ran alongside the horse, bounding along on all fours at an easy pace as Kyven’s stolen horse, a very burly and sturdy young roan stallion, and said very little. In a way it was almost like traveling alone, at least until she made one of her rare comments, or they stopped to relieve themselves, give the horse a short break, or eat something. They passed by a few travelers and one patrol of Loreguard, but nobody challenged them. Lightfoot was obviously collared, and Kyven moved with calm confidence and certainty, looking like an honest man going about his business.

After dinner, though, Kyven surprised Lightfoot by pulling her up in front of him in the saddle. She seemed to protest until he put his arm around her, then she settled down a little. “I’ve heard what Clover had to say, but I haven’t asked you yet what happened after I was captured. So tell me.”

Lightfoot glanced back at him, but she did oblige him. In her usual manner, she used as few words as possible. “Not much to say,” she began. “Shario came to us. Told us what happened. He took us from the shop. I burned it down first, though,” she added, “and made sure of the vault. Destroyed everything. He put us with a few of his men. Good men, I know them. I trust them. They pretended to be Arcan traders. They took us to Atan in a wagon. There was no trouble.” She leaned back slightly against him. “Virren took us in. He has a place. An old mine. We stayed there. Clover came to us a few days later. She sent the kids to Haven. Lucky refused to go,” she said with a slight chuckle.

“He likes you.”

“He’s a good kid,” she said in a complementary fashion. “He wants me.”

“Nothing wrong with that, Lightfoot. If I were a cat, I’d want you too. You’re all kinds of woman.”

She hissed slightly, a kind of snorting chuckle, and patted the arm wrapped around her furry tummy. “Flatterer,” she accused.

“Hey, it’s the truth,” he retorted lightly. “So, you like him?”

“He’s a good boy,” she repeated. “But I won’t give him what he wants.”

“So you don’t like him.”

“I didn’t say that,” she said, a bit hastily. “We’re going to war. I don’t want to get pregnant.”

“Ah. You won’t give him *that*.”

She nodded. “Not even once. Too much risk,” she grunted. “I was a first joining baby. So was my mother. I won’t risk it.”

“Did you tell him?”

She nodded again. “He said he’ll wait.”

“Now that’s devotion,” Kyven chuckled.

“We’ll see.”

“Poor little Lightfoot,” Kyven chuckled. “Tweak in Haven, I’m human, and you won’t risk it with the only male left.”

“I’m a pervert too,” she said calmly.

Kyven laughed. “So, me being human doesn’t bother you?”

She shook her head. “Does Clover.”

“I know, she hasn’t made a single invitation since I was changed back,” he chuckled. “But that’s okay. I understand, and I don’t mind. I just don’t do it for her like this. There’s no attraction for her. And I’d never dream to impose myself on her when I don’t incite those kinds of feelings in her as a human.”

“That’s her. Not me. It’s still just as big.”

Kyven blushed slightly, then burst out laughing, patting Lightfoot on her muscled stomach. “That’s because you’re so small,” he teased.

“Works for me,” she declared. “She’d do it if you were an Arcan,” she hummed.

“Probably. It was my body that attracted her.”

“You *were* handsome.”

“What is this? Emotion?” Kyven teased, and he gasped a little when she elbowed him in the ribs. And she was not gentle.

“You do have that necklace.”

Kyven chuckled. “Now I see why you don’t mind,” he told her. “You’ll make me use the necklace.”

She glanced back at him. “It’s just as big,” she repeated evenly. “When you fuck me from behind, I can’t see you anyway. Does it matter what you

look like?”

Kyven burst out laughing.

She proved that she wasn't joking when they made camp, well back from the road in a sheltered nook nestled up against a heavily weathered rock face poking out of the side of a very low hill. After camp was made and the tent was raised, she pulled at his clothes and licked at his neck sensually, and he found his body responding to her advances. That both surprised him and it didn't. She was an Arcan and he was a human, but spending a year as an Arcan had left in him an attraction to his old bedmates that didn't change with his body. He had no trouble settling behind Lightfoot as she was on her hands and knees by the fire and giving her what she wanted. It *was* different because he was no longer an Arcan, he no longer had the impulse to bite the back of her neck as he achieved initial penetration, and he no longer had to worry about scratching her with his large, sharp claws. It was an odd sensation feeling her furry body against his hips and legs, but the sensation he was feeling elsewhere was no different as a human as it had been as an Arcan. She felt the same, and she acted the same, her tail battering his side as it flexed and slashed, making low growling sounds in her throat as he thrust into her, performing no different than he had as an Arcan, gripping her by her hips and digging his fingers into her short, soft fur, then sliding up her back and over her sides, leaning over to cup her small breasts and play with her nipples as he continued to thrust into her. He actively explored her, actively compared having sex with her now to before, and found that it really wasn't that much different from before.

She certainly didn't act any different. Lightfoot didn't try to drag it out the way Clover did, she just arched her head back and urged him to go faster, thrust harder, which never failed to cause him to obey. Their session ended the way it usually did, with him roughly kneading her breasts and holding her against him as he thrust hard and fast into her, until she gave out a growling cry and he felt her clench around him. That incited his own climax, and he pulled her against him and held her tight as he spent himself into her.

“Well, that was certainly like old times,” he panted, which made her laugh.

“It’s just as big,” she retorted breathlessly. “Again. Rest, then again.”

“Yes ma’am,” he chuckled, putting his forehead on her shoulder as he continued to massage and fondle her breasts.

They reached Riyan about sunset the next day. Kyven and Lightfoot didn’t meander into the city, instead approaching it from the trees near Tobacco Road and looking it over. The tent cities still surrounded the city, and now that he knew what to look for, he easily identified the Arcan pens to the southwest, directly behind a large array of tents. There were hundreds of campfires dotting the grassy plain separating the city from the woods, the campfires of thousands of Loreguard soldiers. Even from there, they could hear the faint reedy sounds of music, of fiddles and guitars and pipes and mouth organs, as the men whiled away the time waiting for orders to move.

“We’ll go into the city and get a room,” he told Lightfoot. “You’ll hold the room while I go out and do the work. I’ll come back before sunrise and rest, then go back out later. I’ll need you the second time out to get the Arcans ready. The first time I go out will just be to kill as many collars as I can.”

“Alright,” she growled, obviously not liking the idea of waiting in the room.

They worked their way back out to Tobacco Road, Kyven mounted, and Lightfoot padded beside his horse as he rode north, towards Riyan. The road bisected two large arrays of tents, and several groups of soldiers at fires near those tents watched Kyven and Lightfoot go by. Kyven found it a little odd that there were no guards before they reached the tents, but perhaps the Loreguard figured with this many men around, nobody in their right minds would try anything. They wound their way through the tents along the road, and even came within a hundred rods of the fence of the

Arcan pens. Both of them looked it over as they passed, and saw that it was exactly as the reports described. The Arcans were penned up inside the fence, and they had nothing. No tents, no blankets, nothing. They were all naked as well, wearing nothing but a collar, and they were sitting, laying, standing at the fence looking out, just trying to pass the time as they waited to be moved out. As was usual for Arcans, he saw almost no talking, and what talking there was was done in whispers and done out of easy sight from the outside. But since he'd been there once himself, he had an idea of what to look for.

“Hold, traveler!” a voice called behind them as they approached the outskirts of Riyan. Kyven reined in the roan and looked back, in time to see three men on horseback trotting down a path between rows of tents behind them and to his left. The man in the middle was a Loreguard officer, a captain by his rank, and he had two sergeants riding escort with him. They got out onto the road, and the three of them cantered up to a stop just behind his roan. Lightfoot moved as he turned the horse to look at them.

“What do you want, soldier?” Kyven asked calmly.

“We need that Arcan,” he answered, pointing at Lightfoot.

“Tough,” Kyven said immediately. “I need her more.”

“That wasn’t a request, citizen,” the captain said with sudden flat eyes.

“I wasn’t being cordial when I said no, either,” Kyven answered gratingly. “I know my rights, and I know the law. My dad’s a lawyer. You can’t take my Arcan, because she’s my personal property.”

“Your father doesn’t know the law from his own ass,” the captain said haughtily. “We have every right to confiscate your Arcan by eminent necessity.”

“Try it.”

The captain gawked at him, then he dismounted his horse as he pulled a slender crystal rod from his belt, which what some might call a master

key. It could unlock almost any collar. Unobtrusively, Kyven put the tip of his boot against Lightfoot's back, wrapped himself in an illusion of himself so fast that his glowing eyes never registered to the men, and when the captain roughly grabbed hold of the small Arcan and tried to put his key to her collar, Kyven channeled lightning *through* Lightfoot and into the collar. The magic had to come from him, but he used Lightfoot as a living extension of himself. The captain yelped and staggered back when a sudden flash of light and the sharp sound of an electrical arc filled the twilight, dropping his master key onto the road and shaking his hand violently to get rid of the sudden numbness.

"I hope you like my dad's collar," Kyven snickered. "We had too many people steal our Arcans, so my alchemist uncle made us collars that nobody can take off but us. So like I said, soldier, no. And that means *no*."

Lightfoot looked up at him in surprise, but he simply had his illusion smile knowingly down at him. It would actually behoove them to have the soldiers take Lightfoot into the pens, where she could quietly start spreading the word, but Kyven wanted to see how serious they were about it, and how far they were willing to go. If they tried to throw him in jail or arrest him for not giving them his Arcan, then he knew they were *desperate* for Arcans.

He looked to the pens again, and wondered how many of those Arcans were Loreguard-owned, and how many had been confiscated from nearby plantations.

"Boy, you are two seconds from a jail cell," the captain warned as he flexed his fingers. "I'll haul you in for interference with official Loreguard business and assault."

"I didn't do a thing," Kyven retorted smugly. "You shocked yourself, and did it trying to steal my property."

"I think this joker needs a night in the Riyan jail, Captain," one of the men said.

“I’m not going to jail for stopping you from stealing my Arcan,” Kyven snorted. “So yes, let’s call up the Riyan Regulars and tell them all about it. I don’t care if you’re the Son of the Trinity, you’re not taking my Arcan without paying for her.”

“*Paying?*” the captain gasped.

“Paying,” Kyven said flatly. “I spent a hundred credits on her thanks to this damn Arcan shortage, so I’ll take off that collar for, say, two hundred credits.”

“That’s highway robbery!”

“No, it’s a seller’s market,” Kyven said smoothly, admiring his fingernails. “Either you pay me to take off that collar, or we go talk to the Riyan Regulars, who I’m fairly sure don’t like you very much given you’ve brought a bunch of scuffy-looking hooligans to their town and I don’t doubt they’re raising hell every night in the city after they get tanked up on beer and whiskey.”

“Sergeant, go get a grounder,” the captain said flatly, glaring at Kyven. That glare turned into a shocked look when Kyven leveled a pistol right in his face.

“Go ahead, Sergeant, go get that grounder. I’m sure you’ll enjoy picking up the pieces of your officer’s head,” Kyven said coldly. “You want my Arcan, you’re *buying* her. I don’t let *nobody* steal what’s mine.”

“Here now, what’s this all about!” someone shouted. Kyven didn’t look behind him, keeping his eyes locked on the captain, and keeping the pistol leveled dead at his face. “Put that pistol down, young man, this instant!”

“No way,” Kyven said. “This overdressed poppinjay here is trying to steal my property,” he declared. “I won’t let him out of my sights until there’s money being held out, or I go on my way with my Arcan.”

“What’s going on, Captain?”

“This man refuses to surrender his Arcan, Major,” the man said, a little fearfully as he stared down the barrel of a pistol.

“You tried to *steal* her,” Kyven snapped. “No man steals from Jack Masters! No man!”

“Ease off there, son,” the man behind him said soothingly. “I’m afraid the Captain’s in the right here. We have official authority to confiscate Arcans, authorization directly from Avannar. I’m afraid you have to surrender your Arcan. You’ll receive a voucher to get another Arcan from any guild-run kennel, when they’re available again.”

Kyven was quiet a moment, then eased the hammer down on his pistol. “He didn’t *say* that,” Kyven growled. “He just marched up and demanded my Arcan, like he was gonna take her without paying. Then he got pissy when I told him he could shove his attitude up his ass, at least in so many words.”

The captain glared at him.

“Just a misunderstanding, son,” the man behind him said calmly. “So go ahead and take your collar, and then come with me and I’ll fill out that voucher for you.”

“Sure thing, sir,” Kyven said in a much more respectful tone. He leaned down and took hold of the collar around Lightfoot’s neck, gave her a sober look and a nearly imperceptible nod, and then pulled it off. She gave him a steady, calm look in return, then one of the sergeants advanced, dismounted, and locked a plain brassy collar around her neck. Under his illusion, Kyven reached out with his hand and touched that collar and immediately drained it, then patted Lightfoot on the shoulder. She nodded imperceptibly herself, and then the sergeant locked a leash to the collar and dragged her towards the pens.

Kyven rode along with the nearly elderly Major, a man with silvery hair and a trimmed pointed white beard under a weak chin. “Major Stark,”

the man said by way of introduction. “You’re certainly a brave young man to pull a pistol on a Loreguard officer surrounded by soldiers.”

“No man steals from Jack Masters, sir. No man,” Kyven declared. “And that man was an arrogant little shit. Pardon my language, sir,” he said quickly.

“A very rash thing to do, my young friend.”

“Dad always said I had a hot temper and an even shorter fuse,” Kyven chuckled.

“Your dad’s a wise man,” the major chuckled.

Despite pulling a gun on a Loreguard officer, he didn’t really get into much trouble. The Major took him to a pavilion-style tent near the road, just outside Riyan’s edge, and then he sat down and wrote out a voucher for a new Arcan. “There you go, young man. I’m not sure when the kennels will have Arcans again, but when they do, you’ll get a new one. And you can show that voucher to anyone who asks what happened to the one you had.”

“I’m not too happy about it, but I can live with it, sir,” Kyven told him. “I needed that Arcan.”

“I’m sorry to say it, but the Free Territories has a greater need for it,” he said consolingly, patting Kyven on the shoulder. “Just be content knowing that you’ve helped us by giving us your Arcan, son. It’ll be working for the betterment of everyone.”

He rode on from the tent with the voucher, and a clearer understanding of just how desperate the Loreguard were.

He got a room in Riyan in a small, cozy little inn not far from the river, and once his horse was stabled and he was in his room, he got to work. He shed his clothes, and then with a cleansing breath, he took hold of the foxhead medallion and enacted its power. He felt his body turn cold, his bones turn to water, as he was poured into a new mold. The cold sensation faded, and he felt he was again in his black-furred, shadow fox Arcan body.

He mused lightly, wondering how Danna felt at that moment to be human again after days in an Arcan form, but he dismissed it as he got his mind on business. He didn't want to be seen leaving the inn, so he centered himself, beckoned to the shadows, and then vanished into them, stepping into the shadow world.

It took him a moment to overcome the vertigo and feel around, feeling the deep shadows of the night all around him, which made the shadow world seem much more solid, much more *complete*. He could literally see the real world through those shadows, and he moved through it through both walking and by willing the world around him to move, which carried him closer to the pens. He selected a nice shadow among the pens that would bring him out in a corner towards the Riyan side, and then formed the gateway. He felt the *things* inside with him advancing on him, but he gave them no chance to track him down, stepping through the gateway even as he willed the gateway to go through him, and he appeared again in the real world.

He was quite pleased with himself. He had just shadow walked nearly a minar, from the inn to the pens.

Most of the Arcans were laying on the ground, sleeping, but there were a few that were still awake. Melting into the shadows, Kyven dropped down to all fours and began his work.

He had a simple system for it. He would touch a collar and drain it, a very quick process, then lean down, wake up the Arcan, and whisper "tomorrow night." He said nothing more, just *tomorrow night*. Lightfoot was in the pens, and she would be the one to elaborate for them. News traveled very fast through an Arcan community, and he had no doubt that in the hour or so since Lightfoot was put in here, half the pens knew she was sent from the Masked and that there was a plot afoot to get them out. News would also pass just as quickly among them about him, since he didn't hide his eyes from the Arcans, letting them see the glowing eyes of a Shaman looming over them as they woke up, and then given that cryptic message *tomorrow night*. It was easy for him to see where he'd been and where he

needed to go because the crystals in the undrained collars glowed brightly to his eyes under spirit sight, and he worked his way through the entire pens during the course of the night. Since they weren't up and moving around, it made it very easy to be systematic about it, allowed him to complete that part of his task in about seven hours.

With the false dawn peeking over the eastern horizon, Kyven located and drained the last collar from a mature ferret Arcan who was awake, standing at a rail, then leaned in and whispered "tomorrow night" to him, patting him on the shoulder. The ferret looked at him, gaped at his glowing eyes, then almost fell over himself grabbing Kyven's hands.

"Bless me, please," he all but begged in a low whisper.

Kyven put a hand on his shoulder, but put his finger to his lips as he closed his eyes to the spirits. "Tomorrow night," he said again, gripping his shoulder firmly but gently.

The ferret nodded in understanding. He watched as Kyven took a single step back, and then the shadows seemed to converge around his body, concealing it. The ferret gawked like an enraptured child when the shadows seemed to melt away, and *took the Shaman with them!*

Within the shadow world, Kyven took note that the *things* were already very close to him, and that dictated he move very fast. He moved quickly back to the inn and located the shadows within his own room, even as he felt the creatures charging towards him. He ignored them and the vertigo as he concentrated on the shadows of the room, and twisted them together to form a gateway back into the real world. He moved into the gateway even as he willed the gateway to move around him, and then he was back in his rented room.

He moved quickly and confidently. He put his clothes back on, relieved himself at the chamber pot, washed up, and then packed up his bags and left the room. The inn's cook was already awake making breakfast, and the smells wafting in from the kitchen made Kyven's empty stomach growl, so he stopped by the dining room and sat down to a quick

meal of fresh-baked bread, eggs, and bacon. “You’re up early,” the cook noted as he brought out the meal.

“I have a ways to go yet,” he answered as he picked up his fork.

“You look a little tired.”

“I’ve been on the road so long a single night at an inn doesn’t make up for the minars,” he chuckled. “But I’m almost there.”

“Where you off to?”

“Stinger Bay.”

“Ah, yes, you’d need to leave early if you want to get there in two days,” the cook nodded.

“Yup,” Kyven said, picking up a slice of bacon and biting into it.

Kyven deflected the cook’s attempts to engage him in conversation by being polite yet vague, until another customer came down and took the cook’s attention. Kyven finished his meal quickly, retrieved his horse from the stable, and then mounted up and rode off to the east. He took the road to Stinger Bay, a road he’d traveled once before, but when he was about ten minars from Riyan he turned south, following a map Clover supplied to him, using narrow country lanes and overgrown unused roads to circle around to the south. He returned to Tobacco Road, and then again took to the forest, reaching a gentle ridge that gave him a view of Riyan, a ridge just west of the ridge he and Lightfoot had occupied to survey the city. This ridge was going to be occupied tonight by their army, he knew, so he picketed his roan after unsaddling him, spread out his bedroll, and got some sleep.

Tomorrow was going to be very, very busy. He was sure of it.

Chapter 8

The soldiers that were part of the army didn't arrive before Kyven left, but they did find his roan stallion. Kyven himself left the horse, his saddle, and everything he didn't need at his campsite, which was smack dab in the middle of the ridge that Danvers' maps showed the men would occupy to cover the retreat of the Arcans away from Riyan. Kyven had left the camp just a bit after noon, and had returned to Riyan under the illusion of a peasant farmhand. By working his way through the tent camps of the Loreguard in a variety of illusions, he managed to get inside the pens about midafternoon. When he got inside, wrapped in the illusion of a nondescript brown canine Arcan wearing a brass collar just like the others, an Arcan that was about as normal as one could get and would attract not one whit of attention, he immediately sought out Lightfoot. That wasn't an easy task, since there were so many Arcans in the huge pen, a pen where the grass had all but been trampled to mud and the Arcans had no choice but to lay down in it at night. It took him nearly an hour to finally find her, since she was more or less concealed in a knot of Arcans in the center of the pen, hidden from view of the Loreguard if only because so many Arcans were between her and the fence. She was squatted down on her feet, her tail held up off the mud and swishing behind her as she drew a crude diagram in the mud for the benefit of the Arcans that had surrounded her. Kyven didn't have to give it more than a cursory glance to know that she was mapping out the ground south of the pens for the Arcans. "This way," she said quietly in her curt manner, running a finger along a line drawn in the mud. "The humans will go east. We go this way when they draw off."

"But what about the guards around the fence? They won't be drawn off," one of the Arcans whispered.

"That's my job," Kyven said in a low tone.

Lightfoot gave a startled look around, and when her eyes fixed on her, he just had his illusion give her a toothy Arcan smile. “Like it? It’s the new anonymous.”

“About time,” she told him curtly, looking back down. “Me and him will kill the guards quietly,” she continued. “Everyone has to stay in the pen until we give the call to run,” she stressed. “The others need time to draw the army men in the tents between us and the forest away. We can’t give them a reason to turn around.”

“You realize that’s the most I’ve heard you say at one time in almost a month?” Kyven asked her lightly.

She made a rude gesture at him, then looked around at the Arcans hunched down with her. “Understand?”

They all nodded or said yes.

“Good. Spread the word. Everyone just lay down after sunset and wait, and then get up and run when we give the signal.”

“We’ll make sure everyone in the pen knows by sunset,” a small raccoon Arcan assured her.

The others got up, one by one, and wandered away, and Kyven squatted down beside Lightfoot. “Alright, since you came up with a plan, explain it to me,” he told her.

She pointed at the map she drew. “It’s what we talked about,” she told him. “I told them to lay down and wait. We’ll start killing guards when we see the soldiers set up on the ridge,” she explained, looking towards the south. “When they attack, we hold until the soldiers in the tents all get up and run to the fighting. We’ll break the fence down and give the word, and the Arcans will all get up and run. I told them to go into that valley between the two ridges, that should be near the men covering us. They can send them on to the rest from there while we bring up the rear.”

“Sounds like a plan. At sunset, I’ll go tell them what we’re gonna do so they’re ready for it.”

“We defend the Arcans as they run, then bring up the rear. The men covering us will be closer to the soldiers that may run back, so we can run safely while they shoot at them.”

“Very nice,” he nodded. “You’d be one hell of a general, Lightfoot.”

“Thanks. Another group is coming. Listen as I explain it to them.”

Kyven listened as Lightfoot explained her plan to the next group of Arcans, and he had to admire it for its simplicity and thoroughness. She covered all the major possibilities, and her choice of where to send the Arcans was both tactically sound and very clever. The soldiers would be on the east ridge, and that would give them a clear range of fire against any soldiers that ran back to the west. The Arcans would have about half a minar of ground to cover from the pen to the treeline, which wasn’t very far for Arcans.

It would all hinge on the time window between when they started killing guards and when the attack came. But more than that, Kyven also needed to go out and make sure there were no nasty surprises for the men attacking the warehouses and deal with them, which he could do just around sunset, to survey the defenses at that point and report that information to Danvers when he met them.

In fact, given that he should inspect the city north of the river as well to see how many men could get to the south side and how fast, he should start looking around now. Lightfoot had everything under control here, and Danvers would need to know the dispensation and readiness of the Loreguard. If the army was spotted moving north, then he’d hear something about it as he surveyed the enemy.

After Lightfoot finished briefing that group of Arcans, Kyven leaned close to her. “I’m going out to check the defenses,” he whispered to her. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

She nodded. “Be careful,” she warned.

“I will.”

He worked his way out of the pens using illusions of animals, cloaked himself in the illusion of a brown-haired commoner of average appearance and rough yet stoutly made work clothes, and then got to work. He started in the north, checking the tent cities to see what the soldiers were doing, seeing if they were preparing for some kind of an attack. When he saw them all sitting around playing games, talking, and more or less passing the day lazily, he then went into the city proper and visited several taverns even as he carefully checked the city looking for any kind of defensive fortifications...and there were none. The talks in the taverns from the workers, citizens of Riyan, and those soldiers that had passes to visit the city proper was in no way ominous or hinted that they knew Danvers was coming. The soldiers were bored, the citizens a touch annoyed at the soldiers being in and around Riyan and causing problems, and the Riyan Regulars were a bit put out because the soldiers were like soldiers anywhere and tended to get rowdy when they got drunk. Kyven checked both of the bridges over the river in the middle of town and saw that there were no attempts to fortify those positions, and he also noted that the bulk of the soldiers camped on the north side of the river were too far away from the bridges to allow them to respond quickly to the attack. The only ones that might get involved were about two hundred camped right across the river from the warehouses, which might conceivably find some way to fire on anyone trying to torch the buildings, as it was just at the extreme edge of musket range. The south side of the city was much like the north, with the talk in the taverns and inns giving absolutely no indication that anyone knew anything about Danvers and his approaching army. The soldiers were relaxed and lazy, bored actually, and Kyven saw no indications that anyone knew what was coming.

It was nearly sunset by the time Kyven completed his sweep, so he decided to spend the time waiting for it to get dark to get a few things done. He visited the tent cities nearest the warehouses under the illusion of a Sergeant and roamed the many campfires, and whenever he reached a

cluster of men sitting around a campfire, he would pause to drain every crystal in every piece of gear he could reach, and also disable their muskets sitting in racks near the fires with a waterskin and a touch of Shaman magic. The waterskin was filled with honey, and all it took was a bit poured into the barrel, a handful of dirt and small rocks, and then just a touch of heat on the barrel to make the honey less viscous. The channeled heat caused the sticky, gooey mess to ooze down into the breech, which would make it absolutely impossible to load and fire. It would take a gunsmith a good two hours to clean out that mess. Kyven managed to disable a good fifty muskets before it got dark enough.

Once it was, however, he padded back into the shadows of one of the buildings, and then focused himself. This time, he wanted to try something different, so he enacted his own shadow powers to create a cloud of shadow around him, and then used *those* to form the gateway into the shadow world...and it *worked*. With surprising ease, Kyven wrapped his own shadows around himself and formed the gateway into the shadow world, and then he vanished from the real world.

It was no different. The shadow world was filled with stomach-churning vertigo and shifting, queasy sights as the shadows moved about the real world, and thus caused things to appear, shift, and disappear within the shadow world. He also felt the *things* take notice of him, and start moving in his direction, which spurred him to quickly go about his business. A series of physical steps in the shadow world propelled him well south of Riyan in the real world, as he tested the shadows to find people he knew, for when they passed into shadow their faces and their very sense of being became apparent to him. When Clover passed under a shadow caused by a tree, shading her from the moonlight of a waxing half moon, Kyven immediately pinpointed her location. He was already in the general area where he expected the army to be, and he hadn't been far off the mark. As the ominous entities within the shadows moved towards him, Kyven converged a gateway back into the real world, and stepped through it even as he willed it to pass around him.

To those who saw it, it was as if Kyven simply stepped out of the shadows, as if the shadows melted away to produce him. He was at the edge of a small camp set up just to give men rest, with no fire, no music, no tents, just men sitting on logs or the ground, as officers clustered around a single alchemical lamp where Danvers was going over the strategy one final time. A sentry jumped when he saw Kyven, standing there naked as the day he was born, but Clover was already looking up at him with a smile.

“Sorry I’m late,” Kyven said as he knelt down among the officers. “I got a little carried away.”

“What’s your report, Shaman?” Danvers asked calmly, which made the officers bristle.

“They have no idea we’re coming,” he answered, looking down at the map. “These camps to the north are too far to respond quickly. This group right here might have an opportunity to shoot at the men who torch the warehouses from the north bank of the river, so they should keep the buildings between them and the river. The Arcans know what to do, and they’re ready. We’re going to run the Arcans to this point,” he said, tapping the map. “This is a shallow valley between two ridges, and the men covering the Arcans are supposed to be on this ridge, which keeps them out of the line of fire. Me and Lightfoot should have the guards at the pen killed before we start, so the men up here just have to cover us from the soldiers that might run back. I went through these camps here,” he added, touching the tents drawn on the map closest to the warehouses. “I drained every alchemical weapon I could get my hands on, and poured honey and dirt down the barrels of a good number of muskets.”

Danvers laughed. “Very clever!” he said in appreciation.

“Thanks, I just wanted to keep as many men out of danger as possible,” he said calmly. “I’m not sure what else I can do, General.”

“You disabling the weapons of the men closest to our attack point was more than enough.”

“Not all of them, remember that, General,” Kyven warned.

“You got enough to cause a little confusion, and that’s more than I expected,” he chuckled.

“About an hour after midnight, me and Lightfoot will start killing guards,” he continued. “We’ll give you time to hit the warehouses, and then break down the pen and start them towards that valley.”

“I’ll have Arcans and men there to guide them to our planned retreat route,” he nodded in reply. “I have one hundred men on those ridges, and they’ll cover them as they escape. What I want you to do before you go back to the pens is to visit these camps here and do the same thing you did to the weapons in the east camps,” he added, pointing out the camps due south of the Arcans. “They’ll be the ones that will be close enough to fire on the Arcans as they escape, so do what you can to keep that from happening.”

“I’ll take care of it as soon as I get back,” Kyven affirmed. “So, what’s the timeline?”

“You start an hour after midnight by killing guards. About a half an hour later, I’ll start the attack on the southeast corner. As soon as it’s matured, whenever you feel is best, you and Lightfoot free the Arcans and run for it. The men on the west ridges will cover your retreat. They run into the woods here and get redirected to this meadow,” he reported as he touched the map due south of the west bridge, about two minars past the treeline, which wasn’t far from a small hamlet. “When the Arcans are free and in the trees, we break off the attack, rendezvous here, and then form up and start our retreat south. The Loreguard won’t be in a position to organize any kind of pursuit until well after sunrise, which will give us enough time to put a good twenty minars between us and Riyan and give Clover time to wipe out our trail so they can’t track us. We’ll force march until about noon, picking up every Arcan we can find along the way, and stage for an extended rest in a sheltered and secure place I know. After that, it’s day to day.”

“Alright, sounds like a plan,” Kyven nodded. “I’ll go sabotage the muskets of the soldiers, then wait until it’s time to go.” He took hold of his amulet and willed it to enact its power, and felt that eerie sensation that his body had turned to icy water, seeping out of one mold and settling into another. The humans gaped at him in shock as he shivered himself and waggled his tail to adjust to the new sensation, quickly adjusting to the Arcan legs and the tail, and the captain that seemed to hate him the most had a smug expression on his face.

“I knew you weren’t no human,” he sneered.

“I am human, this is just magic,” Kyven answered calmly. “This little alchemical trinket allows me to take on the appearance of an Arcan for a short time. It’s how I can move among the Arcans without scaring them,” he said simply. “They tend to be frightened around humans, and this isn’t a situation where I want them worrying more about me than what they’re supposed to be doing.”

“The black fox Arcan,” another of them breathed, then he laughed. “That was *you*?”

Kyven grinned. “The very one,” he admitted, tapping the amulet, which now had a human head and Danna’s face. “That’s what this little bobble is for, since it’s magic far beyond my ability. I didn’t want the Loremasters to know I was human.”

“Well, let’s keep our mind on our jobs,” Danvers said. “Go back and do whatever you feel is necessary, Kyven. We’ll be starting our attack at exactly two hours past midnight.”

“I’ll be ready. Good luck everyone.”

“You too, my brother,” Clover answered.

Kyven took a single step back, focused himself on his power, and then converged the shadows around him, forming a gateway back into the shadow world. The *things* were very close to him, but he knew exactly where he was going this time, so he was able to traverse the distance in the

blink of an eye, in a single step, find an appropriate shadow cast by a tent near the pens, and then converged a gateway back into the real world, stepping through it even as he willed it to pass around him. He stepped out already melded to the shadows, so he was virtually invisible as he stepped into reality, lurking in the shadow of the tent not fifteen paces from the fence of the pen. He dropped to all fours and slunk over, jumped the fence, and padded along on the half-dried mud as he quickly sought out Lightfoot. She was supposed to be in the center of the pen, and that was exactly where he found her. He melted out of the shadows and became visible in front of her, but his sudden appearance didn't surprise her. She was being attended by six other Arcans, who all started when the black fox Arcan seemed to simply just *appear* in front of them. "They're ready," he whispered. "We start an hour and half after midnight."

Lightfoot nodded. "Anything to do?"

"I'm going to go out and sabotage weapons," he answered. "You just keep low and be ready when the time comes."

"I'll tell the Arcans to start moving towards the south end of the pens once the shooting starts," a large bear Arcan said.

"Good idea, but don't be obvious about it," Kyven nodded. "What you can do is find six or seven Arcans as big and burly as yourself. When the time comes, I want the fence knocked down so we don't waste time trying to go over it."

"I'll take care of it, Shaman," the bear said with a sudden smile. "To be of help to an honored Shaman is all I could ever hope to be."

"You will be," Kyven said as he turned and padded off.

Again wrapped in an illusion, Kyven invaded the southwestern camps of the Loreguard soldiers and did the same thing he did on the east side. He moved among the talking, laughing, carousing men, and as they told stories, ate from spits and pans on the campfires, and passed the time, Kyven moved among them pretending to be a roaming sentry, unobtrusively

draining every alchemical device he could touch, and pausing at outdoor musket racks, where the men stowed their weapons when sitting at the campfires so they had them close at hand, he sabotaged their weapons with honey and a bit of dirt poured into the barrel, then heated with just a touch of Shaman magic. He managed to disable about thirty of them before the honey ran out of his waterskin, and he ambled back towards the kitchen tents to steal more.

But along the way, he saw something that he couldn't just ignore. A Loreguard general was striding along the edge of the tents holding the men, with three other officers with him, discussing something that Kyven couldn't quite hear. All four of them were veritably bristling with alchemical weapons and devices, so much so that Kyven gave them a wide berth fearing they might have a grounder among them that would dismiss his illusion, but he padded along behind them just close enough to make out their discussion.

"I hope they hold up the game for us," one of the officers said with a chuckle. "Franklon has gotten far too insufferable, and we need to clear out his chit bag."

"This should only take a few more minutes, Mick," the general said calmly. "I've always been a big believer in personally inspecting things."

"We need to move soon, or our men are going to start bursting the seams of their uniforms, General Tag," another chuckled. "All this sitting around is making them lazy."

"It won't be much longer, Dennet," the general said. "I don't know for sure, but I'm fairly sure that as soon as they get the last of those supplies here, we'll be on our way." The four of them stopped at the north end of the pens, and Kyven saw most of the Arcans laying down, quietly waiting for the signal to move. "Odd."

"What is it, sir?"

"They're quiet tonight."

“They’re always quiet, sir,” the Major noted.

“No, Major, they’re...still. It’s unusual.”

“Well, sir, I don’t pay much attention to Arcans.”

“You should, Major. They have senses we don’t,” the general said calmly, studying them. “They usually move around much more than this after dark. They’re all...edgy. Nervous. This is what Arcans do when they’re nervous.”

“I’ll ask around to see if there’s been anything happening not reported to us, General,” the third offered. “There might have been another incident with the men.”

“Possible, I suppose,” the General grunted. “Ask around, Captain, but don’t take too long. We can head back to the inn and you can catch up.”

“Yes, sir,” the fourth man said sharply, and not altogether enthusiastically.

Kyven shadowed that man for a while, but after he asked around and found nothing unusual, he returned to the city, no doubt to a large, well-appointed inn where the big brass among the Loreguard were quartered, so they didn’t have to sleep outside in a tent like their men. After that potential threat fizzled out, Kyven returned to the pen and hunkered down with Lightfoot, who was keeping a careful watch.

Time both slowed down and sped up at that point, as the eternal moment of watching pushed through the night inexorably, as the moon tracked across the sky. It was due to set around midnight, and after it did, plunging the camps into starlit darkness, Kyven and Lightfoot started moving around. There were only four guards watching the entire pen, for they relied almost exclusively on the collars to keep the Arcans under control. The two of them weren’t concerned with the guards as much as the roving patrols. They watched those roaming quartets of men carefully to discern their patrol patterns, for men who expected no trouble didn’t tend to pay much attention. That wasn’t to say that these men wouldn’t be alert and

cautious out in the world, but here, deep in civilized territory and expecting nothing, they weren't quite so attentive. What they were watching wasn't the forests for an attack, their primary interest was keeping the men in the tents *in* their tents, discouraging men from sneaking off to Riyan to carouse in the inns and possibly annoy the citizenry. So their attention, such as it was, was focused in the wrong place.

After about an hour, they started to move. The pen guards changed at midnight, so the new guards had had an hour and more to settle in and lose interest, and two of them were asleep. The roving guards didn't bother the pen guards, and that was the important thing that they needed to know. They split up and took care of the guards. Kyven killed both of his with Shaman magic, electrocuting them, and then propped them up so they looked to be asleep in their chairs. The Arcans near the fences watched his movements with fearful anticipation, for they knew what was going to happen, and seeing him kill the guards was absolute proof that it was going to come to pass. Some of them got antsy, started fidgeting, but Kyven's calm stare into the pen, his eyes glowing with spirit sight, calmed them down some. On all fours, melded into the night, Kyven moved with the silence of a ghost along the edge of the fence, coming to the south side as Lightfoot crept up from the other side. "Trouble?" he whispered.

She gave him a flat look.

"Lead them when the time comes," he whispered. "I'll protect the flank."

She nodded, and almost as soon as she did, they heard it start. The sharp *crack* of Briton rifles chattered on the far side of Riyan's south side, as the rebels opened sudden fire on the sleeping armies of the Loreguard. So soon? They weren't supposed to start for another half hour!

The reaction of the army was exactly as Danvers expected. Just beyond the pens, the men were jumping awake with startled shouts, and then a Lieutenant charged down to the camp a moment later as the rifle fire

continued to chatter in the distance, some minar away. “We’re under attack!” the Lieutenant shouted. “Fall in, fall in damn you!”

“Who the hell is attacking?” a surly man growled near them.

“When we get over there you can ask!” the officer snapped. “Get moving, men!”

The bloom of fire appeared in the distance to the east right about where the warehouses would be, and the sharp reports of rifles were suddenly intermixed with the heavier sounds of musket fire, and then Kyven distinctly heard the sharp detonation of a shockrod. There was a sudden impressive explosion from far down there, as what looked like some supply of gunpowder detonated in one of the warehouses, sending fiery shards of wood flying high into the air.

It took the officer about five minutes to get his men up, armed, and moving, and all that time the Arcans in the pen were slowly creeping closer and closer to the south fence, even as the sounds of battle got even more fierce to the east. The east side of Riyan were clearly visible now because of several pillars of fire rising into the heavens, the warehouses down there burning in a raging inferno that couldn’t be entirely natural. Clover had to be down there, using her Shaman magic on the buildings. Kyven watched intently as the soldiers charged to the east, leaving the Arcan pens unguarded, or at least under the watchful eyes of four dead men, whose condition had gone unnoticed in the chaos caused by the attack.

Kyven held his hand up to Lightfoot, holding any action as they watched the men running to the east. The Arcans behind the fence grew highly agitated as they saw open ground between them and safety, but the calm presence of the Shaman kept enough order to keep them from bolting. Kyven counted their steps, counted the seconds, and when he felt that they were too far to stop the Arcans, he jerked his hand down quickly. “Now!” he called.

The Arcans in the pens moved as one. The bear Arcan had done his job and found several very burly, large Arcans to deal with the fence, and they

moved in unison, bashing down the fenceposts to open a large hole for the Arcans. The fenceposts and rails clattered to the ground, and the Arcans now unrestrained, boiled forth in a sudden action so strong it literally shook the ground.

“Go! Go, go, go!” Kyven said, urging the Arcans as they ran from the pens, charging through the tents with Lightfoot leading them towards the break between the two ridges. Kyven bounded along the edge of them, getting just past the tents as he watched the soldiers intently, both the ones in front of him and the ones further north, who had been quartered just east of the pen, who had also vacated the area to repel the heavy assault to the east, a battle still raging from the sound of it, as rifles continued to fire almost continuously, interspersed with musket fire and the blasting of alchemical weapons.

Just as Danvers expected, the flight of the Arcans didn’t go unnoticed for long. The tail end of the men charging east seemed to take notice of the escaping Arcans, and that also caused a little chaos and confusion as men who had orders to repel the eastern attackers now had to warn the command staff about the escaping Arcans, and then get orders back to stop them. Kyven drew himself up solidly as a group of about a hundred Loreguard at the very end of the charge east stopped, milled around, then turned around and started back, brandishing their muskets. That many men couldn’t stop all the Arcans, but Kyven could see that they could kill quite a few of them, no matter what the men on the ridge did to try to stop them. They’d be in musket range, and that meant that Arcans were going to die.

Now it was his turn. Kyven couldn’t fight a hundred men, but Kyven was a Shaman whose specialty was illusion, and that gave him a weapon. He imagined a *huge* illusion, the biggest he had ever tried, and then beseeched the fox for the magic to power the spell. She granted him that power, and he felt his knees unlock as a staggering amount of power flowed through him, far more than he had ever tried to channel at once, but he was up to the task. With teeth clenched and his tail sticking straight out, he channeled that power and manifested the illusion.

Kyven had imagined fire, a roaring wall of hellish flames about fifty paces from the soldiers and about two hundred paces from him. The illusion was created with exquisite attention to detail as Kyven threw everything he had into it, all but putting a bit of his own *soul* into the illusion to try to scare the soldiers into retreating, and that effort gave the illusion great power. The illusion of the flames towering a hundred rods overhead was absolutely perfect, was so hot that the flames seemed to melt the ground, and so detailed was his imagination, down to the individual licks of flame within the wall, the skin-tightening heat, the smell of burning grass and scorched earth, the hot wind roaring from the wall due to air heating, and the column of smoke rising, that the wall of fire that suddenly exploded from the ground *burned the grass*. Real fire erupted from the grass under the illusion, but Kyven was so intent on holding his illusion, the biggest he had ever done, that he was completely oblivious to the world. Eyes locked on his illusion, he held a steady stance and held a single hand out as his eyes glowed with emerald radiance, and the hot wind created by his illusion flowed over him, billowing his fur and hair in undulating ripples. He couldn't see the soldiers beyond the wall of flames, but he saw no attempts to shoot through the illusion; then again, they'd been quite a distance from the Arcans before he raised it, which was a deterrence from trying to approach and also a means to hold their attention. His wall didn't extend all the way to the trees, only going about two hundred rods, but it certainly had their attention because it was right in their faces.

He lost all focus on the world, for his entire world had become the illusion. He had no idea how long he held it up, what was happening elsewhere, he concentrated solely on the fire, keeping it looking completely realistic, concentrating on the little things that made the fire believable. It was so believable that the illusion intruded into reality and burned the grass, fire that was spreading from the base of the illusion in both directions, spreading quickly through the dry grass and was actually accomplishing what Kyven himself could not. The grass fire was spreading towards the trees, and blocking the soldiers from trying to chase down the Arcans. Behind the oblivious Shaman, the Arcans continued to flee towards the forest, moving in a steady stream on all fours, low to the ground as they

moved like a fleeing herd, a stampede of frightened cattle. The grass fire was creeping closer and closer to their column even as it spread towards the dumbfounded soldiers, who gaped at the towering wall of fire and felt its searing heat even from fifty rods away, *real* heat. Fearing that the heat would ignite their gunpowder, they would come no closer. The Arcans continued to flee, hidden behind the wall of fire on the north and to the south hidden by the blazing light in the faces of the soldiers caused by both the illusion and the real fire spreading from it; the soldiers had all that brilliant light in their faces, and they could see almost nothing in the darkness behind it, only shimmering shadowy shapes behind the flames that could be Arcans but could also be nothing but shifting shadows caused by the fire.

After a moment that dragged on for longer than he could imagine, the toll of maintaining an illusion that big was exacted on him. Kyven felt himself falter, and then he knew he had to stop the illusion or die, be drained of his own energy. He jerked his hand away as he canceled the illusion, felt a bone weariness in him so profound he could barely stand, but his weariness was buried in consternation when he saw that his illusory fire had sparked a very real grass fire that was still spreading. The soldiers on the far side shuddered when that wall vanished, and seeing Kyven and his glowing eyes, they took aim at him with their muskets. But the first ranks of them suddenly keeled over, blood flying, and seconds later the sharp reports of Briton rifles reached his ears over the crackle of the fire. The men on the ridges were using their superior range to fire on the soldiers, and the men, stunned by the attack and fearful of the approaching grass fire, broke their nerve and scattered, searching for cover from the hidden infantrymen firing at them. The men on the far side of the fire became a disorganized mess as men retreated from the fire and dove behind tents or logs pulled to campsites to serve as seats, as the steady chatter of Briton rifles fired from the nearby ridge kept the men pinned down.

He could barely move. He'd never done an illusion that big before, and he could barely fathom what was going on, his mind swimming in a haze of crushing fatigue. While he was trying to move, huge hands grabbed hold of

him and whisked him away, and it took him a moment to realize that he was in the arms of a large bear Arcan, the same one he'd ordered earlier, who was running on his legs towards the trees as smoky lines of musket balls cut the air in front and behind him. Blearily he saw dark shapes on the ground, Arcans shot and killed while fleeing towards the trees, and saw more and more soldiers rushing back to the west, only to stop and seek cover when the riflemen on the ridges opened up on them. Something warm spattered on his face, and the huge bear staggered, but kept going. Dimly, he realized it was blood, and there was blood flowing from a wound high on the bear's shoulder. Despite his wound, the strong arms around him didn't waver, and he was carried into the trees. As soon as the dark shadows of the canopy above blocked out the stars, Kyven's eyes rolled back in his head and he passed out.

He woke feeling almost like he was back in Haven and had just finished one of his brutal training sessions. It was already daytime, for sunlight streamed through the trees, and he found himself in a rolling open-topped wagon. Men on horseback were to either side of it and Lightfoot was riding in the front seat with the driver, he saw as he sat up wearily, and he also saw that he wasn't the only man in the wagon. Four other men were laying in the wagon on bedrolls, laid out side by side, bandaged and sleeping. The wagon was the last in a train of them, and behind them, on all fours, were a *huge* number of Arcans. Most of them were nude, padding along on all fours at a fast walk that was very nearly a jog as the horses moved at a slow canter or fast walk. They all looked both overjoyed and a little nervous, and there was hushed talk among them as they moved along behind the wagons.

He yawned and sat up, holding the side of the wagon for much needed support, since he wasn't sure if he could stand at the moment. The dreadful hunger that came with an exercise of that kind of power was already starting to stir deep inside him, an all-consuming need to eat that mixed in with his nearly phobic fear of starving, of being *too* hungry, a scar left over from his time in Arthur Ledwell's cage. It had been a long time since he'd

felt that hunger, the need for the body to restore what it had burned off using magic, and it was enough to make him risk moving. He could tell just from the feeling of himself that he was human again, which reaffirmed his notion that the amulet could only keep him transformed so long as he was conscious. When he passed out, he must have changed back. “Where’s my horse?” he called to the nearest mounted soldier.

“Dunno,” he answered. “I can go fetch one of the spares.”

“Whatever, just bring me something please,” he said.

“I’m supposed to tell the General when you wake up anyway,” he shrugged, spurring his horse into a fast trot and moving up along the wagons.

One of the Arcans padding along just behind the wagon approached, and jumped onto the back. Kyven was laid out closest to the back gate, so it put the canine Arcan with mottled brown and black fur all but on top of him. “Shaman,” the Arcan said with the most profound respect. “Are you well?”

“Just exhausted,” he said in a weary tone. “I’ve never tried anything that big before. What happened? Where are we?”

“I know not, Shaman,” the canine said regretfully.

“What happened after I passed out?”

“I don’t know when that was, Shaman, but I was near the back. There was fire between us and the soldiers, but they were shooting at us as we ran. A few of us died,” he said with a sorrowful look. “But not nearly as many as would have had you not stopped the soldiers from getting closer. When we reached the trees, these humans and some Arcans working for you guided us to a meadow where these wagons were parked,” he explained. “We waited there until a group of men on horses came for us. They put you in this wagon, and we’ve been following you ever since.”

“We’ve been moving all night?”

“Yes, Shaman,” he said with a nod. “We were running as fast as the wagons would go until dawn, and since then we’ve been moving at this fast walk. I think I heard one of the humans say we’ll stop to rest soon. I hope so, many of us are getting hungry.”

“Good. Did Clover talk to you?”

“The honored Shaman did, briefly,” he answered. “She said we would be given guns and could fight against the Loreguard. Is it really true?”

Kyven nodded. “If you want. We’ve got you free, but we’re not there yet. We need your help. Every Arcan that fights against the Loreguard increases the chances of everyone making it safely away.”

“I will fight, Shaman,” he declared proudly. “You risked your life for us, Shaman. That honors me beyond all words, that you would risk *your* life for me. For *me*! I would be a poor excuse for an Arcan not to risk my life for you in return.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” he said, putting his hand on the Arcan’s shoulder. “But don’t sell yourself short, my friend. Your life is as valuable as mine.”

He snorted. “My life would *never* be worth yours, Shaman,” he said in a voice of near-adulation. “I owe the greatest of debts to you, honored Shaman. I will fight for you.”

“I’m glad you will, but you won’t be fighting for me, you’ll be fighting for yourself. For your freedom.”

“If fighting for you brings me freedom, then that is a nice bonus,” he said with a slight toothy smile.

Horses galloped back towards them, and Kyven looked back. He saw the General and four other men on horses, one of them leading a horse, rushing back. The Arcan gave the men a fearful look and moved to return to the others, but Kyven’s hand on his shoulder tightened, holding him on the

back of the wagon. “Kyven,” Danvers said with a bright smile. “I’m glad to see you awake. You scared the hell out of quite a few people, you know.”

“How?”

“That fire,” he grinned. “I’ve never seen anything like it. You paralyzed the entire battle with that monstrosity.”

“It was just an illusion, General,” Kyven chuckled. “But it was *supposed* to be big and scary looking. I’ve never done one that big before, and I’m sure feeling it now.”

“I was worried until Clover explained it,” he answered. “She said you may be hungry when you wake up.”

“That’s one hell of an understatement,” he grunted. “I need meat, General. Raw.”

Several men shuddered, but Danvers wasn’t one of them. “Clover hunted a doe for you,” he said. “She cut it up and it’s waiting for you at the lead wagon.”

“Good. General, where are the extra rifles?”

“In the supply wagons up ahead of us,” he answered.

“Well then, we need to hand them out. The Arcans need to get used to carrying them.”

All four of the men with Kyven gave him a startled and highly disapproving look. “Arming them already? I hadn’t planned on that quite yet,” he said, and Kyven could hear the strain in his voice.

“I don’t think they need to be loaded until they get lessons in using them, but they need to get used to carrying them,” Kyven elaborated. “Trust me. Carrying anything while running on all fours takes a little adjusting.”

Danvers looked at the canine Arcan, and then nodded.

“Go back to the others and tell them that anyone who wants to fight needs to go up and get a rifle,” Kyven told the canine. “Make sure to warn them that they won’t be loaded. They’ll get the bullets after they learn how to use them. And also make sure to tell them to be very careful with the rifles. Don’t let them get dirty and treat them gently.”

“I will, Shaman,” the canine said with a nod, then he dropped off the wagon and bounded back to the others and started talking.

“Gently?” Danvers asked.

“Any number of those Arcans can snap the triggers off with their fingers by accident,” Kyven said simply. “We can start teaching them when we rest. Where is Clover?”

“She’s out with a contingent of men freeing Arcans from nearby plantations,” he answered. “Recall that that’s part of our strategy. Every Arcan we free between here and Cheston is either another soldier against the Loreguard or denying them a worker to exploit.”

“I didn’t realize I was asleep that long.”

“It’s nearly noon, Kyven,” Danvers chuckled.

“That late? Wow,” he grunted. “Well, let me get on a horse and go eat before I pass out again.”

Lightfoot came down from the front and helped him mount, and to his surprise, she got on behind him. “You’ll fall off otherwise,” she told him bluntly as she grabbed him around the waist, and held him securely in the saddle. He took the reins and urged the horse into a fast walk, and Danvers fell in beside him, with the others behind them.

“How did it go?” Kyven asked.

“Textbook,” he answered. “We caught them with their pants down. They were confused and disorganized, and we hit them hard and then withdrew before they got any semblance of control over the men. Clover was part of the advance group that attacked the warehouses first. She set

fire to them, and they got caught by a patrol which started the fight earlier than expected. The Loreguard had no idea what hit them. You timed it on your side almost perfectly, and when half the army stopped and thought to turn around, I had a group of cavalry come up to the treeline and open fire on them, then retreat before they could return fire. The slashing tactics confused the absolute fuck out of them. Begging your pardon, Lightfoot,” he said, nodding to the cat Arcan, then he chuckled when she let go long enough to give him a rude gesture. “Right about the time their officers got on the scene and started taking control of the army, you had the Arcans evacuated, and we withdrew quickly. I had skirmishers set to discourage pursuit, but they didn’t have much to shoot at as we pulled back. We’re about twenty minars south of Riyan now, making good time despite carrying the wagons, but we’ll be abandoning the wagons when we reach our staging area and moving ahead using nothing but pack animals. I have all these extra horses, may as well use them,” he grunted. “The Arcans need to get used to carrying more than a rifle, Kyven. When we reach the staging area, every one of them will be carrying a pack holding his tent and some basic sundries like drinking cups and blankets. They’re there waiting for us, two thousand packs.”

Kyven whistled. “I hope you didn’t pay for those,” he said.

“I only paid for about half of them,” he chuckled. “Clover and the other Shaman have this amazing spell, my friend. They can create a duplicate of something using magic. Clover’s already made about thirty rifles by taking one apart and duplicating the pieces, then my gunsmiths put the pieces together. All she needs is the raw materials. I give her a sturdy piece of wood and a few pots and pans or a musket we took from the Loreguard, and she gives me a Briton rifle.”

“I’ve never seen her use it, but I’ve heard about it,” Kyven told him.

“Anyway, over the last few years, Clover, Stalker, and Coldfoot have been making those supply packs for me, mainly for the Arcans that have gone through my plantation on the way west,” he explained. “That way they always had what they needed for the journey. I’ve always kept a few

hundred stored for emergencies, but Coldfoot came to the plantation last year and started making them by the wagonload. When I asked why, he said that they needed large stockpile of gear that they might need in the near future, and my plantation was the best place to hide it. I had about two thousand of them stored in secret bunkers around my land, stored there in case of any kind of major action or mass Arcan movement, just in case. Luckily, though, this army came with its own equipment. They'll come in handy now, though."

"That sounds right before the time I started my Walk," he mused. "Just about when things started moving. Even back then they knew what was coming, and started planning for it. Actually, they've known for about ten years."

"Known what, Kyven?" one of the men behind him asked.

"That the crystals are running out," he answered immediately. "What's going on out here is all because of that. That's why the Loremasters are moving to take over Noraam, and why we're moving now. Without crystals to power the collars, there will be a mass killing of Arcans. That's something the Shaman couldn't ignore."

"Running out?" the man asked in surprise.

Kyven nodded. "They're not an infinite resource. The humans have used most of them up. What's left won't last Noraam five more years. Already, crystals are starting to dwindle. We saw it in Atan just before I found out I'm a Shaman, that the mines were producing less and less. They were about to start major exploration around the village to search for more deposits right before I left."

"Fuck," the man grunted. Kyven glanced back at him and saw his face thoughtful and worried.

"Now do you understand what we're doing, Major?" Danvers asked. "We're freeing Arcans that would be slaughtered otherwise and giving them a chance to fight for their freedom. The Loreguard have always seen Arcans

as animals, but I know better. I've seen them in action, I've faced them in battle before. I know many of the men are wary of arming Arcans, but you'll see. The Arcans will surprise you."

"They will," Kyven said simply as the smell of raw venison sent his stomach on the warpath. "Arcans are just as smart as men, but the main thing you have to get past is their conditioning. Most slaves need some encouragement and reinforcement to shake it off. I know I did," he grunted. "I remember how I felt when I left the Ledwells. I was terrified, and it took me time to get to where the sight of that controller or a raised voice wouldn't send me running to the nearest corner. I never thought I'd be broken so fast, but that collar," he said with a shudder. "I'd wish that on no man."

"What do you mean, Shaman?" Danvers asked.

"The spirits changed me into an Arcan for a while," he answered in a flat voice. "To teach me what life was like for them, since I had the same attitude most men had about Arcans. I didn't hate them or torment them for fun, but to me they were just...*Arcans*," he said. "My totem didn't like my attitude, so she changed me into an Arcan as both punishment for something I did and to teach me the truth. I was an Arcan for about a year before I was changed back. I was caught, put in a kennel, then sold at auction to a sadistic son of a bitch named Arthur Ledwell. He put a collar on me that duplicated the effect of a pain stick, and then he put me in a cage behind his house and starved me very nearly to death," he said in a grating voice. "To make me more *tractable* so I could be tamed," he growled as he leaned over in the saddle and took a handful of venison and started tearing into it with his teeth. "I can't describe that kind of horror, gentlemen, to be trapped in a cage in plain sight and starve while people walked by, ignoring me, even eating and drinking in front of me. The torturers in Avannar could have taken lessons from that bastard," he said with a shudder, as the memory of it caused the emptiness in his belly trigger a nearly panicked reaction that made him stuff the entire handful of venison into his mouth and struggle to chew and swallow it, nearly choking on it.

“What happened?” a man behind asked in an eager kind of voice, absorbed in his tale.

“I nearly died,” he said darkly. “And I mean I came a whisker from it. The vet they called in said that I should have been dead already. It ultimately took a healing bell for me to recover.”

“They spent that much?”

“I was the black fox Arcan,” Kyven said without much humor, taking another piece of venison from the wagon and taking a bite. “Ledwell bought me to resell me in Alamar as a breeder. I *was* rather unique. In fact, I was very nearly sold to a furrier at auction. I was very nearly killed right at the auction block for my fur.”

“So, how did you escape?”

“I didn’t,” he answered, taking another bite. “I killed Ledwell when he tried to kill his wife when they argued about what to do about me. She didn’t like the collar, and when she saw the truth of her husband in how he tormented me, it changed her. Ledwell couldn’t accept her demands, and he tried to kill her, but I killed him first. You’d think she’d have been grateful enough to let me go, but that bitch *sold* me,” he spat. “I save her life, and she sells me. I got my revenge on her, though,” he laughed bitterly. “She sent me to the Blue Ring of Alamar, but I escaped before I was auctioned off.”

“I heard about that,” another man laughed. “Nobody ever believed an Arcan could escape the blue ring.”

“That was me. An Arcan could escape from there if he was serious about it, but the ones I met inside were content. Being sold in the blue ring is like inheriting a fortune from an unknown relative,” he said, remembering Silver. “That’s a guarantee for a soft life, and few Arcans would try to escape from that. At least on my side. The fighting Arcans they sell there might have a different view, but I was being sold as a breeder.” He took another bite and swallowed it almost without chewing. “I escaped from

Alamar, made my way back to Atan, then went west, to Haven.” Lightfoot jabbed him in the ribs, almost knocking the breath out of him. “No reason to keep it secret now, Lightfoot. The Loremasters know, and it’s just a matter of time.”

“What’s that?” one of the men behind him asked.

“The Arcan nation,” he answered evenly.

“Bullshit on that,” another of them grunted.

“That’s what I thought too, until I saw it,” Kyven said. “There’s about a half million of them on the cold plains far to the northwest, where the winters are so bitter that men won’t live there,” he told them. “They have a city there even bigger than Avannar. All the Arcans that escape from Noraam or are freed by the Masked end up in Haven.” Kyven glanced back at the four men. “Arcans, gentlemen, and nothing but. There are some humans who live up there, mountain men and settlers that stumbled across the Arcans, but they don’t live in the city, they live in villages at the edges of Arcan territory, and they get along with the Arcans just fine. The Arcans built that city and they live in it. And if you ask me, they do alright for themselves.”

“I find that hard to believe,” one of them said. “Arcans don’t seem smart enough to do that. Not that there aren’t some damn smart Arcans, miss Lightfoot,” he said quickly when Lightfoot glared at him. “But on the whole, I wouldn’t believe Arcans have the ability to live without human help.”

“Arcans are just as smart as we are, Captain,” Danvers said calmly. “And as you said, some are even smarter. I think we can all agree that Clover is highly intelligent.” There was a rumble of assent. “The Arcans are no different from us in that regard, my friends. There are smart ones and dumb ones, but on the whole, they’re more than smart enough to do for themselves.”

“Ferals,” Lightfoot grunted.

“Yeah,” Kyven agreed. “The feral Arcans are why people think that Arcans are animals. Because those Arcans really are. They taint the image of the Arcans for the rest of us.” He took another bite. “You’ll see when we start training the Arcans in how to use the rifles. They’ll do fine, at least once they shake off the slave mindset...if they can. Not all of them will. Those are the ones we’ll have to watch, and ensure they don’t work as soldiers. They’ll have to be given work like cooking and such. It takes too long to deprogram that kind of trauma in just a couple of days. I spent a couple of weeks with the Ledwells, and it took me *months* to get over it... mostly. I doubt I ever will.”

“Well, Master Kyven, you’ve intrigued me. When it comes time to train the Arcans to the rifle, I’d like to be there to help,” one of the men behind him said. “I’d like to see what kind of soldier an Arcan can be.”

“You’d be surprised,” Kyven grunted, not divulging the secret inside, that the Arcans were literally created to be soldiers. That kind of basic programming had to still be in the Arcans, if Lightfoot was any indication. “As long as we don’t pick up Arcans unsuitable for it because of their histories or their conditioning, we’ll be alright.” He finished the rest of the venison in his hand, and reached for another piece.

“So, you were an Arcan,” Danvers mused. “What was it like?”

“Very different, but not much at the same time,” he answered. “The Arcans have a culture that seems simple on the surface, but is actually quite different from ours and very complicated. I learned very quickly how to fit in among them, because I had to. They’ve borrowed some human concepts, but at the core Arcan mentality is vastly different from ours.”

“How so?”

“Arcans think in terms of *we*, not *I*,” he said after a moment. “An Arcan is a part of a greater whole, a member of the pack,” he elaborated. “at least when not stressed. In the kennels, you’ll find those Arcans that take what they can from others, because the survival instinct wins out. When not under that kind of stress, though, Arcans are very generous and giving.”

They're also intensely social. Put five stranger Arcans in a room, and within an hour they'll form a group and be very open, trading information back and forth among one another. There's no such thing as a *secret* in Arcan society. Arcans don't have the same concepts of privacy and personal space as we do, so they'll say and do things in company that a human wouldn't. They have a very *open* society."

"That's actually conducive to being a soldier," Danvers said after a moment's contemplation. "Soldiers are members of a group first and foremost, and must consider the welfare of the unit while in battle."

"And that's how you'll find the Arcans to behave once they're given some training in being a soldier. They'll follow orders and always think and act in terms of the greater whole."

"And what you said explains Balton a great deal," he added, rubbing his chin. "Some of the Arcans sacrificed themselves to allow the rest to escape. The well being of the whole was more important than the individual."

"And so they willingly died to protect the group," Kyven said simply. "They died in a manner of their own choosing, and Arcans always consider that to be the best way for it to end. Those Arcans died knowing they were saving others, and that made the sacrifice worth it." He chewed down another mouthful of venison. "I found my time as an Arcan very interesting, and educational. I experienced life from their perspective, and I learned first hand just how the humans abuse them. I believe I'm a better man because of it."

"You were a better Arcan," Lightfoot told him.

Kyven chuckled. "So biased," he teased. "How many casualties?" he asked Danvers.

"Not many," he answered. "Three killed and seven wounded. The only fatalities were among the men who burned the warehouses. We were out of musket range, so our firing lines didn't get a scratch. We did have a broken

leg from a shying horse throwing the man, but outside of that, it was completely one-sided. We left several dozen dead Loreguard behind.”

“Good,” Kyven nodded. “Not that I enjoy killing, but they’ve sided against us, and that’s a few dozen fewer men trying to kill us tomorrow.”

“Well said.”

The small army stopped to rest in a large flat clearing that was clearly a fallow farm field surrounded by trees and with the blackened bones of a house at the far end of the large clearing. Danvers called it the Ghost Plantation, a place considered haunted and cursed by the locals, who wouldn’t buy it or farm it. Four families had bought the land, built houses, harvested one crop, and then they all died. Every single one of them. The blackened bones over there were the remains of the house burned by the locals after the last family was found dead, all their servants and Arcans dead, and not a mark anywhere on any body. That kind of macabre mystery had attracted attention from Riyan and Avannar, but nothing unusual or suspicious was ever found. Those people and the ones before just...*died*. That gave this place a very black reputation, and Danvers exploited that. This was the staging area Danvers had mentioned, for he ordered the army to bivouac, the wagons to be unloaded and stripped, then broken apart to use as firewood. In a surprisingly short amount of time, the men had their tents up in orderly rows...but the Arcans weren’t quite as lucky. None of them had ever raised a tent before, and not many of the men were enthusiastic about teaching them how. It fell to Kyven and Danvers and a few officers to demonstrate how it was done to some Arcans, who then raised their own tents, then helped others raise theirs. After all the tents were raised, fires were started, cookpots set out, and the humans partook of an army staple, boiled beans, bacon, and bread and cheese. When the supply quartermaster started working out how to divide it between the men and the Arcans, quite a few of the men told him not to give *their* food to the Arcans, that there wasn’t all that much food with them to give it away to *Arcans*, and they could damn well hunt for their own food.

Kyven felt that was an eminently practical idea to teach the men a little lesson. He gathered up the Arcans and selected those like himself, those who knew how to hunt, and they then ranged out in several packs. The men eating beans and drinking ale chuckled at the Arcans sitting around campfires with no food, at least until Kyven returned from the forest dragging four deer tied together, then another Arcan, a sleek cat, brought back half a dozen rabbits, and a pack of six Arcans appeared from the trees struggling to drag a Tauron, a beast that outweighed all six of them about four times over, and had enough meat on its nearly ton of bulk to feed a large swath of Arcans. Even Kyven was impressed with that; a Tauron's sheer size would make it *extremely* hard to kill with anything but magic. That those six Arcans felled a Tauron with only one injury among them, one broken arm, was a true accomplishment. To feed over a thousand Arcans, they'd need about two hundred deer or equivalent meat, but it didn't take that long to gather that much. The pack that killed the Tauron was a harbinger, for the Tauron was part of a small herd of wild cattle and Tauron mixed together, and the hunters effectively killed off the wild herd and dragged it back to camp. After about two hours, the men who had been laughing at the Arcans sitting near their fires hungry turned to slight grumbling when the hunters returned with enough meat to feed them all. Kyven probably made even more enemies that day when the Arcans with him, dragging a large bull cow to the Arcans nearest the soldiers, offered to share it with the men.

"No," Kyven said calmly, and more than loud enough for the men to hear. "They didn't help set up camp, they laughed at us while we learned how, and they didn't offer to share their beans, so we will not share our meat. Only give it to the humans who helped teach us how to raise the tents. None for anyone else except General Danvers and his command staff. They'll get our meat when they earn it, and not before."

So, while the soldiers ate beans, the Arcans ate venison, rabbit, squirrel, and beef...and Kyven was fairly sure that the smell of the meat was making the beans taste *very* bland, even if the men didn't much like the

idea of the Arcans eating it raw. Very few Arcans preferred cooked meat over raw meat.

Clover returned not long after dinner was over, and she and about 30 men were escorting a large throng of Arcans. Some of them were clothed, some of them were not. Most of them were not wearing collars, but a few still had collars around their necks. Most of them were carrying bags, sacks, packs, boxes, and other containers, loaded down with supplies. The mounted men were weighed down with muskets, alchemical weapons, swords, even a few farm tools.

“Welcome back,” Danvers told them as Clover padded up to where he, Kyven, Lightfoot, and Danvers’ command staff had come out to greet them. “I see you had a good time of it.”

“We had to be very firm with a few plantations,” she said with a slight smile. “And a few shots were traded at a couple of them, but they saw things our way. I had the Arcans clean out the storehouses of each plantation we raided. I recall that we’re low on stores, so I brought anything I could find.”

“Good, good,” Danvers smiled. “Why don’t you and Kyven help our new Arcans settle in, and explain things to them?” he asked, then he blanched and stepped back as the tail end of the procession came in. At the tail end, bringing up the rear, were six of the largest dogs Kyven had ever seen in his life. They were large canines the size of a horse, like gigantic wolves, their thick coats ranging from smoky gray to pitch black. They moved with sinuous grace, those massive wolves, then started moving slowly up along the Arcans. “What the hell are those?”

“Oh, one of the plantations had an owner that liked to breed Lupans, General. I thought they might like it better with us than in those pens, so I asked them to come along. They agreed to help us for a while.”

“You...*asked*?”

“A Shaman spell, General, though I’m not very good at it,” she said modestly. “Were it not that I’m a canine myself, it wouldn’t have worked. I can only talk to other canines. My brothers and sisters are much better at it than me. So, do you think we’ll have a use for them?”

“Oh, we might, as long as they don’t eat any horses,” he said, looking speculatively at the huge animals. Some of the Arcans seemed comfortable near them, but most of them shied away from the monstrous canines.

“The owner didn’t feed them horses. He fed them Arcans.”

Kyven paled and looked at her.

She nodded soberly. “I had to explain to them quite sternly that we are *not* food anymore, and they agreed. They didn’t like the way we taste anyway. They’ll hunt for their food, just as we will. They’ve already eaten, we stopped for a quick meal about an hour ago and they were kind enough to share the deer they killed. Any sign of pursuit, General?”

He shook his head. “You were masterful hiding our trail, my dear Clover,” he said.

“I am happy to help, General,” she smiled.

“Let’s get these new Arcans settled in and explain things to them,” Danvers said.

Clover’s nature became abundantly apparent after the Arcans handed over their supplies to the army’s quartermasters, sat down, and listened. Clover had no fear of standing up and addressing them, speaking to them in a calm yet strong voice as she explained exactly what they were doing, where they were going, and what they could get from it. Clover was gentle, kind, wise, and compassionate, but she was also very persuasive. When she asked how many of the new Arcans would be willing to fight, after a long speech where she quite effectively charmed the whole lot of them, more than three quarters of them responded. The rest, too timid or conditioned to fight, volunteered to work for the army as horse handlers, cooks, pages, anything it took. They all understood the one thing she stressed, and that

was when it was over, they would all go someplace far from the humans and live in peace and security, where they would be *free*. But to get there, they had to help the human army in its quest to hold the attention of the Loreguard and draw them off to give the Arcans west of the mountains time to push them back, as well as to give the Flaurens all the help they could as they moved to make war on the Loremasters.

Clover was far more valuable to the army for her ability to persuade than she was as a Shaman.

It took until well after nightfall to get the new Arcans situated. Those freed last night welcomed them with open arms, sharing what was left of their meat, sharing their tents, sharing the tools and utensils that were in the packs. While they were doing that, though, Kyven was introduced face to face with Clover's other little addition. The six Lupans were even bigger up close than they were at a distance, and when they came over to Clover, Kyven and Lightfoot were introduced, in a man-animal kind of way. "Lupans are quite intelligent," Clover explained as the six horse-sized canines approached them, unafraid of the fire. "Not as intelligent as man or Arcan, but they are quite clever in their own way. Lupans, coyotes, and wolves are about the only animals I've ever managed to be able to get through to using that spell," she admitted with a laugh, reaching up and stroking the smoky gray Lupan's neck fondly.

"They're huge, Clover. *Huge*," Kyven breathed, looking eye to eye with one of the smaller Lupans, the one with a coat as black as a cloudy, moonless night, and penetrating yellow eyes that literally glowed with an amber radiance. It was faint, but in the dim light, it was visible. The Lupan had to lower its head to look Kyven in the eye, for it stood as high as Kyven at the shoulder; the Lupan was literally large enough to ride like a horse, though its narrow back didn't look like it would be very comfortable to ride. The black one was the same size as the roan stallion Kyven had stolen from the Loreguard. He was a little unsettled with the massive black animal started snuffling at him, then he sputtered and laughed reflexively when a tongue the size of a frying pan slurped the entire right side of his head.

“They like you, my brother,” Clover grinned.

The Lupans went off to hunt as Kyven, Clover, and Lightfoot joined Danvers in the main tent for a strategy meeting. Danvers had them all sit at a large table, and it had a map on it. The map was very old, made of brittle parchment, and was obviously an antique of some kind. The spelling on the map was very strange, the letters oddly formed, but in a way, they sort of resembled Noraavi letters, and formed words that didn’t match the names of the kingdoms, cities, rivers, and mountains of the Free Territories, Malan, and Carin, but they weren’t named that on the map. The Free Territories had a different shape on the map, and the name scrawled across it in flowing letters was *Virginia*. Carin was bigger on this map, and was called *North Carolina*. The great Georvan city of Lanna was called *Atlanta*, and Georvan itself was named *Georgia*, though much smaller on this map than it was in reality. Alamar was called *Mobile*, Nurys called *New Orleans*, and Phion called *Philadelphia*. Two River on the map was called *Pittsburg*, and Deep River was called *Parkersburg*. Looking far up, he saw that about where Haven was, was a place called *Manitoba*.

“Confused, Kyven?” Danvers asked with a smile.

“The land looks right, but the names aren’t,” he said, touching where Atan would be on the map, but it wasn’t marked.

“This is a copy of a map of Noraam before the great war, my friend,” he said, his eyes lit up as he looked at it. “I love cartography and maps and geography. That’s what my father did for a living, he was a mapmaker. In a way, it started me on the path of a Loreguard officer, because I wanted to *see* the places on the maps. This map is over three hundred years old, and it was copied from a map that was itself hundreds of years old. This was our land before the war, when the entire continent of Noraam was a single nation that stretched from the Angry Sea to the Blue Sea, and it had so many people that they filled the entire land.”

“Why show us this, General?” one of his officers asked.

“Because this is what the Loremasters want to do,” he said, motioning at the map. “Restore Noraam to this. That may be a noble venture, and may very well come to pass some day, but the methods they’re using, and the things they’re teaching, are not. They want to restore Noraam, but they want to rule it. Before, Noraam was ruled by the *people*, who elected men to represent them in the interests of government. The Loremasters want total control over Noraam, friends. They want a dictatorship, a tyranny. The responsibility of any civilized man or Arcan is to resist tyranny, my friends. That is what we’re going to do. Look at this map, gentlemen, ladies. Look at it closely. If the Loremasters succeed, then the map of Noraam as we know it will change. And you never know what city, town, or village in that new world *will not be on the new map.*”

That was a sobering thought. If the Loremasters won, then what might happen to Flaur? Would the great cities of the peninsula be wiped out, to disappear from everything but ancient maps, the last record that they ever existed? He wondered how the residents of one place on the map he knew was no longer there, *New York*, would feel to know that their city was no more. That part of Noraam was effectively a wasteland, and nothing could live there because of some strange kind of illness that took hold of anyone who settled in the area that made their bones brittle, their hair and teeth fall out, and strange sores to ulcerate on their bodies. It was called the Cursed Fen now, a place dominated by squat brush and sawgrass, areas of wetlands, and not a single animal, not even insects. Atan wasn’t on this map...and if the Loreguard marched into his home village, it very well may disappear from modern maps too, the people killed or driven off, the buildings burned down.

“This is the great civilization,” the youngest officer, a captain breathed as he stared at the map.

“It *was*,” Danvers said calmly. “They’re gone now, and that’s history. They and the other great power, a vast land across the blue sea called China, destroyed themselves in the war, and shattered the entire world in the process. If we don’t want the Noraam we know to follow it into history, my friends, we’d better do something about it. And the first step is to plan our

route to Cheston. So,” he said, taking his chair and rolling up the ancient map to reveal a much more modern one underneath, “let’s make some decisions.”

Kyven didn’t listen for a while, looking at the map. He’d never seen this before. The stories were...well, there were no stories. Just myths and legends. Just artifacts dug up from the ground, like softrock and the occasional piece of stone, and there were rumors of buildings underwater off the coast of Flaur. It was hard to fathom a nation so large that it occupied the entire continent. This was like looking back in time and seeing the past, a past where *billions* of people lived in the world, before the war. A war that destroyed it all, shattered those left behind, and erased the memory of that ancient civilization from the memory of man. He wondered what the spirits knew of that time long ago, and how much that knowledge was guiding them now.

That was one of the purposes of wisdom, to not make the same mistake twice.

Did they know? Did they know that their civilization was doomed? Did they know what was happening, or did things get so out of control that they lost sight of the goal in the face of the distractions? Or did the need to reach that goal so cloud their judgment that they lost everything because of their lack of focus? That was what Danvers was showing them, not to lose sight of the goal even though many details stood between them and the objective. That was solid *wisdom*, he saw. Danvers wasn’t just intelligent, he was wise. He was a man Kyven could respect, and a man from whom he could learn.

But it showed that it was happening again, he saw. A group in power, blinded by the lust for more, were about to make a cataclysmic mistake. They showed no wisdom in trying to understand that which they sought, they only sought it for the power it could give them. That what they were after could destroy civilization on Noraam was of no consequence. Greed incited arrogance, and that arrogance made them believe that they could control that which couldn’t be controlled. They had no respect for the

wisdom of the past, and that would put the whole of Noraam at risk. That which destroyed the ancients should not be toyed with, yet the Loremasters believed they could succeed where the ancients did not, confident in the fact that modern man had more knowledge of alchemy than the ancients...even when they had no clue just what alchemy truly was.

No wisdom.

He tuned back in as Danvers touched the map. "We can resupply here, at Penbrook. South of that is tobacco country, and we'll find a lot of Arcans there to add to our ranks. We'll have to strip just about every plantation we come to of food to feed this thing as it moves south and grows."

"The Arcans can help with that," Clover told him. "We are good hunters. We'll send out hunting parties along our flanks to bring back game, and they can double as scouts to protect us as we move."

"Can we trust them with that kind of responsibility?" one of the officers asked. He cleared his throat uncomfortably when four sets of eyes gave him a cool stare.

"Kyven, we need you to start out. We need everything you can tell us about Penbrook. Loreguard strength, layout, everything," Danvers said, touching the map again. "Do everything you can to make sure we can ride in with a minimum of fighting."

"I can do that," Kyven said with a nod.

"There are supposed to be horse farms west of Penbrook, gather information on those as well," he added. "We're going to need more horses to carry supplies, since we can't use wagons. They'll slow us down, and staying in front of the army they send after us is the key."

"I'll see what I can do," he said. "Where to from there? I need to know to keep ahead."

"I'll give you a talker so you can keep in touch," Danvers said. "But right now, we're going to angle more to the east, then turn back more to the

west. I want to avoid Rallan at all costs. There's a significant garrison there, and we're not going to risk the army on a needless battle. Half of what we need you to do, Shaman, is get us around Rallan without a fight. If at all possible, you need to send the Loreguard detachment there to the west so we can get around them."

Kyven scratched his cheek. "I...think I can do it. I saw one of the Loreguard generals in Riyan. I need his name."

"What did he look like?"

"Tall, very well developed, graying hair. Brown eyes, and a goatee."

"General Taggan Wild, one of their best," Danvers told him. "Goes by Tag to us upper officers."

"He certainly seemed competent," Kyven said. "Noticed things his men didn't."

"He's the one they were sending with the army west, but with us on the loose, they may send him after us." Danvers leaned back in his chair, rubbing his jaw. "He's not a man to take lightly. I caught him with his pants down, but he won't make that mistake again. Odds are, he'll badger the High Command to let him come after us. He doesn't like to lose."

"So, we're going around Rallan to the east," Clover noted. "That's out of my territory, but I think we'll send a message to Longtooth. That's his territory, and he knows those roads better than anyone. He can give us detailed information of Carin, and that can help us move."

"Who has territory in Georvan?"

"Several Shaman, but the wisest of them is Dancer," she answered. "Remember her, Kyven?"

"Why would I?"

"She's the one that picked up the fledgling Shaman after you beached the ship," she answered. "The red fox."

“Oh yeah,” he mused, remembering. “She was nice.”

“I’ll send the message as soon as we’re done,” Clover said. “By morning, I should know which way to go to avoid the most trouble.”

“Sounds good,” Danvers nodded. “As far as the Arcans go, we need to train them quickly, but we don’t have much time. It’s going to be sessions when we stop for the day. I’ll organize a schedule of training to the rifle and the musket, because those are the weapons we’ll be picking up along the way. I hope they learn quickly.”

“They’ll learn,” Clover said simply. “They’ll also need to learn the basics of being soldiers.”

“I’m already working on that,” he answered. “Part of the rifle drill will be teaching them the art of being a soldier. Discipline, teamwork, and staying alive. But for now, them learning how to set camp and carry gear will suffice. I just hope we can keep up with them,” he chuckled.

“You mean keep up with the horses, General,” one of the officers said.

Both Danvers and Clover chuckled. “An Arcan can run a horse to death, Major,” Danvers answered with a smile. “This will be the most mobile army ever put on the field, nothing but rifle cavalry and Arcans. We’re going to need that mobility to outflank the traps the Loreguard try to put in front of us. Speed is our greatest asset.” He looked to Kyven. “I’m afraid that what we set here won’t need your input, Shaman, and we need you out there.”

Kyven stood up. “I’ll get started immediately,” he said. “I need the strongest horse you’ve got. It’s going to earn its hay.”

“I have just the horse,” he smiled. “It’s not really a horse, though. It’s a monster.”

“You have an Equar?” Clover gasped. “I didn’t see it!”

“It’s a very small one,” he answered. “So small it looks like a large horse, but it can run all day without lathering.”

“How did you tame it?” Clover asked in astonishment. “Even the Shaman can’t convince them to do anything!”

“I did it the old fashioned way. I paid a fortune for a newborn colt and raised it with other horses. He’s much smarter than the horses, but they managed to tame his wilder notions. Mostly,” he said with a smile. “I hope you’re tough, Kyven. My Equar is...spirited.”

“I’ll deal,” he said, looking at Lightfoot. “Stay here this time. The Arcans need you to teach them.”

She nodded.

“Get me that talker and let me pack some things and I’ll get started.”

“What do you need?”

“A map, the talker, some supplies. And,” he said, a slow smile growing, “a Briton rifle, a keg of gunpowder, and a Loreguard uniform.”

“I’ll have them ready in an hour,” Danvers said immediately. “What’s the gunpowder for?”

“I have to draw of the Rallan garrison somehow,” he smiled.

The Equar was *big*.

It looked just like a normal horse, but was nearly eight rods tall at the shoulder, where a normal horse was more like six rods. It had a shaggy black coat streaked through with gray, and it had shaggy white fetlocks on its big hoofed feet. It had a broad snout and stout muzzle, filled with teeth that weren’t completely horse-like. Equars were omnivorous, so the wide front teeth one would expect were flanked by fang-like canine incisors. Its teeth were built for eating anything, and its jaws were strong enough to shatter bone. Danvers stroked its wide muzzle fondly. “His name is Strider,” he introduced. “He’s a very smart horse, Kyven. But he’s young, so he’s a

bit...playful," he said with a slight smile. "Strider, you're going with Kyven," he instructed. "He needs you, and no horse can do it but you."

The massive animal snorted and stomped a foreleg.

"He's ready to go," the general said as the grooms loaded the last of the supplies. Danvers handed him a small copper box. "The talker. It's set to only communicate with mine, so don't worry about any eavesdropping. The map is in the saddlebag. After you get to Penbrook, do what you need to do, and I'll call you to warn you where we're going next."

"I'll do what I can, General," he said, having to literally jump to get up into the saddle. The Equar shifted under him.

"Just be patient with Strider," he said. "He's only a juvenile, so he's a bit...rambunctious."

As if to live up to that reputation, the Equar suddenly reared, whinnying in excitement, then it turned and charged off to the south. Kyven was so startled he nearly lost his seat, and found himself hanging onto the animal for dear life as it raced away. "He loves to run," Danvers' voice came through the talker in his belt.

"I noticed!" Kyven called, hanging on for dear life.

Behind him, unnoticed, two Lupans followed along the trees. The two animals followed the human with the unusual scent, a scent unlike anything they had ever smelled before. The two wolf-like animals were intelligent, but ruled by their instincts. And something about that human...intrigued them.

He was going off alone, and the Lupans knew that these humans and the prey were doing something very big, and very important. The spirit-talker had said so. It was never good for one to operate alone. It was dangerous. It went against the tenets of the pack. And so, the lone human with the intriguing smell would not be allowed to go alone.

The pack was all.

Chapter 9

Strider was an interesting companion, and also quite an asset.

Danvers was not boasting at all about his Equar. The animal had Shaman-like endurance, capable of running at an open canter literally all day, eating up the minars like no other horse could. In the ultimate complement, Kyven had to admit that the Equar would be able to match Kyven or any other Shaman stride for stride, and Shaman were so well conditioned that they could run virtually anything into the ground. The Equar would give Kyven the same kind of mobility he'd enjoy if he stayed in his Arcan form all the time, which he could not, and it gave him the ability to outrun virtually anything that might chase him. Strider wasn't a race horse, but he could run fairly fast. A faster horse may catch up to him, but after a couple of minars, the Equar's indomitable endurance would take over and allow him to keep galloping along as the other horse fell behind. Kyven felt utterly comfortable on Strider, and confident that if he couldn't talk his way out of a situation, he could sure as hell run from it.

And that was the way of his totem. Fighting was the last resort for the shadow fox, and so it was the last option for Kyven. And if he did have to fight, then attack by ambush and be done with it before the enemy knew what hit him.

Much as Kyven would talk to his last horse, Spirit, and almost feel as if the horse was talking back in its own way, Strider proved to be just as smart as Spirit was. Kyven rather liked Strider, and thankfully, the Equar seemed to like Kyven. He was a bit playful, but most juveniles were, but he knew to settle down and be serious when Kyven told him to do so.

Strider wasn't his only companion. Twice, Kyven had spotted two massive sleek shapes lurking far back in the trees. At first Kyven thought that the Loreguard was shadowing him, then he thought that a monster had

tagged his trail and was stalking him, but investigation showed that it was a pair of Lupans. They were from the pack Clover had persuaded into the army, and Kyven wasn't exactly sure what they were doing. He doubted that Clover sent them, else they'd be traveling with him, not ghosting his backtrail and staying out of sight as if they were hiding from him as much as anyone else. Either way, the two would help if only by keeping his trail clear of anyone that might want to follow him. Two horse-sized wolves were a very formidable deterrent.

Thanks to Strider's inexhaustible canter, Kyven pulled well ahead of the army, cantering down back roads marked out for him by Clover that would connect with Tobacco Road about five minars north of Penbrook. But it was still a journey of days, and those days gave Kyven time to ponder things, both in the world and in his personal life. The war had started, and that saddened him. The Shaman understood the futility of war, but they also understood that there was a time when it was necessary to protect life. Madmen like those commanding the Loremasters were not men with whom could be bargained, and they had either power-hungry sycophants or men who were blindly loyal to their cause forming their armies that would fight for them. The Loremasters had, at its core, a noble idea, to restore the great ancient civilization, but the means they were using and their plans for afterwards went against everything which those ancient people believed. They wanted to rule, they wanted absolute power over Noraam, even if they had to crush the kingdoms under their heel to get it and get thousands of men and Arcans killed. They also had committed the mortal sin of not learning from the past, or having so much arrogance that they believed they were better than the very ancient civilization they wanted to emulate. The crystals were running out, and they believed in their arrogance that they could control the machine that created the crystals in the first place, either not understanding or not caring that that machine had destroyed the civilization they wanted to restore.

The lust for power had destroyed men, started wars, and had once destroyed the world. Truly, he felt that the Arcans had the right idea in their approach to such things.

He wondered how Danna was doing, adjusting to being an Arcan. Knowing her...not well. He could almost imagine hearing her rant and curse and yell at everyone around her, making them suffer for the indignity she felt, lashing out because she felt helpless. He knew that feeling only too well himself. He also wondered what the shadow fox wanted from her. She had to have a reason to take Danna; if anything, his treacherous totem was methodical and thorough. She did everything she did for a reason, and it was all part of her grand plan, a plan so intricate and convoluted that Kyven couldn't make heads or tails of it. The fox wanted something from Danna, that was abundantly clear. A simple answer was the fox wanted her obedience, forcing her to command the armies of Haven, but that was a bit *too* simple. No, the fox was more subtle than that. Yes, making Danna an Arcan gave her a very personal motivation to fight against the Loremasters, since the Loremasters would enslave *her* just like any other Arcan, but there was more to it than that. With his treacherous totem, there was always a game within a game, a lie behind a truth, a hook hiding within every piece of bait, an ulterior motive behind every act.

And now he, Kyven Steelhammer, the quiet, honest young man who was raised to be honorable and forthright, was a Shaman of a spirit of deceit, and had taken to her ways so quickly that Master Holm would be ashamed of him. Perhaps that was why the fox picked him, some kind of malicious satisfaction in taking an honest man and turning him into a scoundrel, but the truth of it—if there ever was a truth where he and the fox was concerned—was that the events of the day required scoundrels more than honest men. The Loremasters surely weren't being honest, and he had proven just how useful a scoundrel could be if he was in the right place at the right time. Shario was certainly every bit as much a scoundrel as he was, but Shario did it with a panache and flair Kyven couldn't quite match.

There were enough men out there to fight for truth and honor, meeting on the field of battle and letting courage and conviction carry the day. Kyven was a soldier in another war, a dirtier war, a war of cunning, guile, deceit, and ruthlessness. And, he had to admit, it was a task for which he was well suited. The fox had utterly corrupted him in those regards, had

taught him well when it came to skullduggery and the occasional necessity of cold-blooded murder, but that too was the lie within the truth. That was not who Kyven was, even though it was a way in which he had to act. To him, that was just a job. He felt much more like a Shaman when he helped someone who needed him than he did when he assassinated a faceless enemy on the streets of Avannar, felt far more the Shaman in the smile of one who needed him than the terror in the eyes of a man he was about to kill.

And this new task of his, this was a waste of his talents, and also made him ponder what the fox was up to. She should have left him in Avannar, left him to pick over the Loremasters at his whim now that he had learned how to shadow walk, for he would be unstoppable. Yet she did not. She pulled him out of Avannar and attached him to the army. Admittedly, it was doing something very important and could use his help, but what he was doing could be accomplished by Lightfoot, for that matter. No, there was another game here, he could smell it. The fox had her own plans for Kyven out here, and in her usual style, she was leaving it up to him to understand exactly what it was she wanted him to do. She wouldn't come out and just tell him what it was; that wasn't the way it worked between them. If Kyven couldn't figure it out for himself, then he would lower himself in her eyes. He was a full Shaman now, a walker of the path, and he should be wise enough to understand what his spirit wanted him to do. Much as in the vision where she started him towards her desired goal but left it up to him to understand what that goal was, what was going on here was similar. The fox had ulterior motives for putting him out in the field, and he had to figure out what it was she wanted him to do. If he couldn't figure it out, he was sure she'd be very short with him the next time she manifested and told him what he wasn't wise enough to see for himself.

As they neared Penbrook, he pondered just what she might want him to do out here. What could he do that no other Shaman could? What could he do that was so important to her that she wanted him out here instead of in Avannar, where he could be feeding Haven all of the Loremasters' plans?

The only thing that made Kyven different from other Shaman was who he was, and what he could do. He was weak as Shaman went, barely capable of what most of them considered simple uses of their magic. But in the one realm where he could use his power, it made him a match against any other Shaman. No other Shaman could equal him in the sphere of illusion, because of the blessing of his totem, his aspect of being a totem Shaman rather than a free Shaman.

That was thinking about it too much. The simple way to think of it was that Kyven was human where no other Shaman was. On his way to Danvers' plantation, the fox had silently nudged him into being very visible, very open. Her reasoning was to tell the Loremasters he was out of Avannar, but that didn't mean that it was true. Far from it. She wouldn't tell the direct truth like that. Maybe she wanted the humans of Noraam to know that there was a human Shaman.

Hmm. That certainly had possibilities. The bias against Shaman cultured by the Loremasters held its strongest basis in that Arcans weren't people possessed of souls, that the evil that created Shaman made Arcans different from people. If the common man found out that *humans* were Shaman too, well, that would certainly cause a major shift in their thinking. It would stir things up, make it even harder for the Loremasters to move on their plans...or it would cause a backlash against Arcans where humans thought that they were somehow *infecting* humans with Shamanism. No, that was a subject too complicated for a simple man like him.

A wise man understood his own limitations, and admitted them, even as he worked to transcend them.

His arrival at Penbrook lent itself its own problem...Strider. He was a terrific animal for distance, but for a man who needed to be untrackable from one city to the next, riding a massive Equar, the biggest horse most men had ever seen in their lives, lent itself to a certain notoriety that would allow people to track him. That could be a problem...or it could be a means by which he concealed his true identity, if he did things right. Say...for a horse rancher come to Penbrook to look over local land for a new ranch. A

horse rancher would be expected to be riding a good horse, and a rich rancher would be riding a magnificent animal. That cover would also allow him to assess the ranches west of the city as Danvers wanted.

And so, to the residents of Penbrook, a rather handsome middle-aged man rode into town on a huge dark horse, dressed in fine leather chaps and denim trousers, with a rugged cotton shirt and a battered old wide-brimmed felt hat atop his head. The man was polite if a bit terse, and the first thing he did was ride up to the tavern, slide off that huge animal, and walk in with confident steps without even tying up his animal, with nothing but a pat on the shoulder and a request the animal not wander.

The man was obviously rich, friendly if a bit short-worded, and was interested in the ranches west of town. Penbrook had nearly as many horse ranches as Avannar did, and there was a bit of friendly rivalry between the two regions, if not a little animosity with the tobacco farmers who saw all that prime farmland going to waste feeding horses. The people of Penbrook were only too happy to answer every question the handsome man asked, even about things that had nothing to do with farming and horse ranching, such as how many Loremasters were quartered in town, if there was a Loreguard detachment there, and how often the Loreguard patrols came through town on the single road through town, which connected to Tobacco Road about half a day to the east on a wagon or walking horse.

And like all travelers, he was a harbinger of news and rumor from more populated areas. Penbrook had heard about the attack on Riyan through the Loremaster stationed there, who had heard it through alchemical devices that kept him in touch with the rest of them. The visitor too knew about the attack, but knew more than the villagers knew. The rumors said it was a very large band of robbers who had executed a daring attack on one of the warehouses on the east side of town, but got caught and shot their way out with heavy losses. “They weren’t bandits, they were Arcan thieves,” the visitor told them. “The Loreguard had hundreds of Arcans in a pen there in town, and the bandits stole them. From what I heard, the Loreguard was chasing them east, towards Stinger Bay. I’ll bet

they have a ship anchored somewhere around there, and they're gonna get the Arcans out to sea before the Loreguard can catch up to them."

"Given what Arcans are going for right now, that would be worth some chits if they pull it off," one of the tavern occupants noted.

"That's probably why they did it. With all these soldiers running around, I guess the usual bands of highway robbers can't make any money. They're getting desperate, so near as I can figure, a bunch of them all got together and came up with that crazy idea. Crazy enough to actually work," the man chuckled. "I don't think anyone would have believed anyone would be crazy enough to attack Riyan when they have thousands of soldiers there, yet they did it, and they got away with all the Loreguard's Arcans. I guess they caught the soldiers napping."

"I wonder how they got past the collars," someone speculated.

"Yeah, that's the part that's got me curious too. I don't see how they did it, but all the word I heard coming down said they did it. They must have had a master key or a grounder or something that got them past the collars...or maybe someone in the Loreguard was in on it and helped them steal the Arcans for a cut of the profit. There's no army in Noraam that doesn't have at least a couple of scoundrels in it, even the Loreguard."

The villagers believed the visitor's story without much consideration, because it mostly made sense to them. And so, they were comfortable thinking the bandits had gone east instead of south, and as such would be unprepared when those same bandits showed up in Penbrook.

The rich visitor rode west, out to the ranches, and looked over a few of them. The ranchers realized that this rich man didn't know the business as well as most, he probably had a foreman that managed things like that for him, but he knew enough for them to see past his lack of knowledge and see only the chits the man obviously had to have, given his fine clothes and the gorgeous horse on which he was riding. He knew just enough to be taken seriously.

The only odd thing the residents of Penbrook noticed about the man that he didn't stay the night. He came in, spent an hour or two at the tavern, then spent half a day surveying the horse farms west of the village. When he came back from his inspections, he bought some supplies from the general store and then mounted up, obviously leaving town. When the resident Loremaster inquired as to why he wasn't spending the night, the wealthy rancher's answer was somewhat curious. "I have other sites I want to look over before heading home, and I want to get that done soon. Something is going on. The Loreguard has thousands and thousands of men in Riyan, and you don't muster an army that big unless you intend to use it somewhere. I'm checking out some new sites for a ranch in case something happens up in Avannar and I have to move my herds. Between what's going on in Riyan and what happened in Avannar, I don't feel comfortable keeping the majority of my stock that close to it."

"What happened in Avannar?" one of the residents asked.

"They had a Shaman up there stirring up trouble," he answered. "He killed a few ranking Loremasters and set fire to their headquarters. When they caught him, they found out he was *human*. A human Shaman."

That caused quite a few whispers and gasps through the residents. "Are you sure?" someone asked.

"Heard it from a Loremaster friend of mine myself," he answered in a sober tone. "A human Shaman. That's why I'm looking into moving my herds south."

"Well, they caught him, didn't they?" someone chuckled.

"I don't care about the Shaman, or if he's human or not," the rich man noted darkly. "What I care about is that army in Riyan. When it marches, I'm moving my herds away from Avannar in the other direction. Unless I don't remember my history, all the nations of Noraam are supposed to be friends. Ain't no reason for the Loremasters to assemble an army that big unless they mean to use it somewhere, and there ain't nothing to attack but one of the nations of Noraam. I'll bet old Smoke here that that Shaman

attacked Avannar because of that army in Riyan,” he declared, patting the huge horse just in front of the saddle. “Even the Shaman can see what’s coming, and they tried to do something about it and failed. The Loremasters are off their rocker, and I don’t want my herds anywhere near their capitol. I don’t want my stock anywhere near Avannar when the rest of Noraam attacks the Loremasters for them breaking the alliance. It sure as hell ain’t *my* fight. If that army marches south out of Riyan, I’m moving my herds to Phion. If they march north, I’ll drive my herds right by ‘em and settle them either here or maybe somewhere near Rallan, which is where I’m going now to look over some land.” He tipped his hat to the villagers. “And I need to be on my way so I can get that much closer to Rallan by sunset. So pardon me if I seemed short or unfriendly, I just don’t have much time left to get my stock somewhere safe. Good day to you all.”

And then the rich rancher rode resolutely out of town, leaving behind him a firestorm of hushed whispers and speculation. None of the villagers had looked at things quite that way before, and now that the rich rancher had laid things out in a different light, it had a logic to it that none of them could deny. Why *was* that army in Riyan? The rancher was right. They’d all heard about it, heard that it had thousands and thousands of men in it, but no explanation from the Loreguard outside of a story that they were going to march that army west, to explore the rolling foothills west of the Smoke Mountains. But if that was the case, why did they need such a huge army? Wouldn’t a few hundred men be better, and cheaper? Why assemble that many men in one place unless they were going to be used somewhere? And where *could* they be used if not against one of the kingdoms of Noraam, who were all supposed to be in an alliance of mutual friendship?

And the villagers started to wonder.

Kyven contacted Danvers that night after making camp in a clearing not far from the road, near where an old wagon track would lead south according to Clover’s map. He relayed everything he’d learned in Penbrook, reporting that the village had no Loreguard garrison, just a

sheriff, and there was only one Loremaster. “There’s about ten ranches west of the city, and I’d say there’s about a thousand head of horses out there,” he told Danvers. “The only thing you have to watch for is the Loreguard patrols. The villagers said there’s two or three visits from them a day as they patrol the road from Tobacco Road all the way out to the village at the end of the road. If they get that many visits, then there must about five patrols on that road riding back and forth. According to my map, Greenfield is a little over thirty minars from Penbrook, and it’s about twenty minars from Penbrook to Tobacco Road. The rumors in the village say that there’s a lot of Loreguard patrolling Tobacco Road right now, so there’s a chance that the army might be engaged if they get warning from the Loremaster and they have enough men close to the Penbrook road.”

“I think we can manage that,” Danvers’ voice came from the talker. “Did you disable the Loremaster’s communication gear?”

“I didn’t really try, because they’d have time to repair it before you get there, and that would put them on guard,” he answered. “Just send in Clover or Lightfoot first. They can deal with it.”

“True, true. Alright, just go due south from Penbrook and survey the plantations due south from there and report back what you find on them, particularly how many Arcans there are. We’ll be moving as fast as we can.”

“Pursuit?”

“Ayah,” he said, almost sounding Alamari. “Between what I have and what you got, I have enough enemy talkers to pick things up. They’re sending about half of the army at Riyan after us, just as we expected. Clover eradicated our trail to hide where we went, but she didn’t destroy all of it. They know they’re dealing with an enemy force of about five thousand men, so they’re sending twice that after us, which is tactically sound. You never willingly go into battle unless you outnumber the enemy two to one. They see an enemy force running amok in the Free Territories to be important enough to split their forces. They’d better be thankful over on the

other side of the mountains, what we're doing for them," he grunted. "There's a garrison of about ten thousand men at Rallan, and then there's the major garrison in Lanna of about thirty thousand men," Danvers told him. "That's the force we're trying to lure to Cheston, so the Flaurens can come up behind them and we can pincer them. We just have to get past Rallan."

"Is that general coming after us?"

"Tag? Nope. They're sending him out west, and they're marching as we speak. They left yesterday. The attack on Riyan spurred them into moving, maybe before they were ready. But the soldiers are gonna be pissed, they'll have to do all the work themselves," Danvers chuckled. "No Arcans to do the heavy work for them, and all those men they hired to do the labor haven't reached Riyan yet."

"I'm sure they'll manage," Kyven said dryly. "Maybe digging ditches and erecting fortifications will show them how Arcans live."

"Clover sent word ahead of them. The reply makes it clear that when Tag gets to Deep River, he's going to be in for a shock."

"They're on the move?"

"They're only about twenty days out, which means Tag will beat them to Deep River by about two days," Danvers answered. "Just enough time for him to settle in his men and rest them before continuing on west. They'll probably allow the entire host to settle into Deep River, and then cut them off. They have enough soldiers to put men on both sides of the river, which will strangle the Loreguard from their supply lines. They'd have to cross the river again to protect those lines, and that is not a river you can just ford."

"I know, I've crossed it before."

"Then you know exactly what I'm talking about. To try to clear out their overland supply lines they'd have to try to execute a river crossing against a hostile force. Tag's not stupid enough to try to cross the river with

a hostile force on the far bank of a very wide river, not when there are no bridges.”

Kyven pondered that information. Clearly, the Loremasters felt that securing a place to build that machine was still their highest priority. They had intended to build the machine well west of the mountains, at the point where the Snake River and Deep River joined, where they could build a stranglehold on the crystal trade and still have access to two major rivers to move their crystals to the rest of Noraam. Taking Deep River was just a leg of that plan, securing the beginning of the planned supply train that would have both overland and water routes. Overland first, until the Loremasters secured their planned city site at Snake River, then move supplies by river. An overland army moving to that point would go faster by going in a straight line, which the river did not do, and for that they needed an overland supply train leaving from Deep River, the only known settlement that far west.

For the Loreguard, they would have few options once Danna surrounded them at Deep River. They didn't have the manpower to hold both banks, not when it would fatally divide their forces, and while Danna vastly outnumbered them, they would have an advantage in being in a defensible position. But Danna didn't have to fire a single shot to win that war. All she had to do was encircle the Loreguard, wait for winter, and make sure not a scrap of food got inside. Danna had the numbers to do that, even if her forces weren't very well armed. The Loreguard would have muskets, maybe some artillery, and quite a few alchemical weapons at their disposal, but they'd do them no good if the opposing army gave them no targets to use them without abandoning their defensive positions and had more than enough men on the opposite bank to ambush and capture any supplies trying to reach the Loreguard forces besieged at Deep River.

But not every man that left Riyan was going to Deep River. As Kyven recalled, part of this first phase for them was to take over all the mining villages in the Free Territories, the last substantial crystal-producing areas left, so they had control over the production of crystals. The garrisons of soldiers located in cities throughout Noraam would be the ones that would

respond to any nation moving to do something about it, with a larger defensive presence in the Free Territories to defend Avannar. It wouldn't take many soldiers to take over the mining villages, since the villages has no militias or standing armies of their own. A force of 30 Loreguard could take over and hold Atan...at least at first. Timble and Virren had all kinds of plans for the Loreguard that came to Atan, since Kyven's history with Atan would cause them to come in and try to sweep out all the unfavorable elements. Atan would be treated like a conquered city, its citizens harassed and abused, and the Masked wouldn't allow that.

Despite Kyven unearthing their plans, they were going through with them. He figured that they thought that they would have the advantage, since most people wouldn't believe the Loremasters were going to do what they were doing until it was too late.

"Alright, I'll report in tomorrow afternoon," Kyven said. "I've adopted a persona that seems to work rather well, and I'll work my way south using it. I—" he stopped, and realized something. Rallan was the capitol of Carin, and though the king of Carin was weak, he wasn't stupid. Maybe that was what the fox wanted him to do. Kyven was the weakest of all the Shaman, but he was *human*, and as such he could probably get in to talk to the king where no other Shaman could. And since he was human, he'd be taken much more seriously than if, say, Clover tried to talk to him.

The fox knew there was a war coming, and now the Loremasters knew about Haven. It wasn't a secret anymore. And since that was the case, then Haven needed to make contact with more than Flaur and explain some things, reveal the duplicity of the Loremasters personally. If Kyven was going to go that close to Rallan anyway, it cost him little to stop by the palace and have a little chat with the king of Carin without the Loremasters knowing about it. Kyven still was needed by the army to warn them what was in front of them, but he could also spare a day to try to smooth the way for the army in another fashion.

"I'll be stopping by Rallan for perhaps two days," he continued. No reason to tell Danvers about what he intended to do. In some ways, Kyven

was very much like his totem, and his totem wouldn't reveal any information that didn't need to be revealed. "I'll do what I can to keep the Loreguard at Rallan off of you."

"Something wrong?"

"I just spotted something, that's all. I think a couple of Clover's Lupans are following me. That shadow was way too big to be anything but a Lupan."

"Hmm, now that you mention it, I've only seen a couple of them since we started moving. I think you might be right," Danvers agreed. "I'll leave you to it, Kyven. Good luck out there."

"You too," Kyven answered, and he turned off the talker.

After he put his things away, he practiced shadow walking. He limited his practice time as the fox warned him, working to understand the shadow world better. She had told him that understanding that world was his defense against its malevolent denizens, so his time inside the shadow world was spent studying it...such as he could. The place was an assault to the senses, from the shifting nature playing tricks on the eyes to the constant vertigo threatening to make him vomit any second. It existed as a kind of wavering parallel to the real world, where elements of it appeared and vanished depending on if they were in shadow, and those places not in shadow just shimmering voids of boiling darkness, like a fogbank of shadow. Shapes and images floated through the place in a chaotic jumble, because there was no true time here, no true distance. Shadows of the present, past, and future jostled together with shadows from all over Noraam.

Understanding that world is your defense against it. That was what the fox told him. But this world simply made no sense to him. It was like a world with no rules—

No, it had rules. What he had to do was learn those rules, learn how this world worked. That was what the fox wanted him to know.

Alright, so. What did he know about this world? Well, it had no sense of time, and distances were entirely arbitrary, even while there was definitely distance in here. After all, he had to physically walk from one point to another to move through the shadow world, but that distance wasn't set. A single step could take him further than twenty in this place, and he already understood that it was his conscious that helped determine that distance. This world reacted to his will, that was another thing he needed to remember. He remembered how he had tricked the creatures in here by stretching things out so he seemed far away, and he recalled now that he always moved to the exact point in the real world he wanted to go despite the shifting nature of this place, which was caused by his intent to go to that spot.

Danna. He tried to find her in this shadowy realm on an impulse, and to his surprise, her Arcan face appeared among the undulating images around him. He walked five steps towards her face, but it came no closer. That told him that great distances *were* represented here, else he'd have reached her in those five steps. He focused on her face and kept walking towards it, mindful of the sensation in the back of his mind that the *things* in here were getting closer to him, seeming to track him down faster when he was moving than when he was standing still. No, that wasn't right. The fox had said that his disruption of their natural habitat by forcing his will on this place was attracting them to him, like a beacon in the darkness. He reached Danna, who looked annoyed, but still quite handsome despite wearing fur and a muzzle now. Her eyes were the same, and even in the misty, shifting image before him, they were beautiful.

He stopped moving, then before he knew what he was doing, he converged a gateway out of the shadows and stepped through it even as he willed it to move around him. The shifting shadow world yielded to a shadowy glade filled with tents, and Kyven was standing under a large tree just at the edge of it. A pavilion tent was being erected not twenty paces from him, and standing not five rods in front of him were Danna, Hardstep, and Firetail. Danna was blatantly Arcan, wearing a short-sleeved cotton shirt and a pair of curious leggings that only reached her knees, leaving her

Arcan shins and feet bare. She retained her blond hair, her white-tipped ears poking out of it, and was still sleek and toned. She almost looked like a girl on a picnic, but the heavy leather belt hanging cocked off one hip, which held two pistols and what looked like a shockrod, belied her casual appearance. It was warm and muggy wherever they were, which explained her light clothing, and the sun was peeking over the trees behind him, casting the large clearing in rosy, shadowy hues.

Firetail's tail rose, and she sniffed at the air experimentally. Then she laughed. "Come out, my brother," she commanded. "And explain how you got here!"

"I never could hide from you, Firetail," he said ruefully, which made Danna literally jump in place. He stepped forward as she whirled around, and he saw that even as an Arcan, she was still a very handsome woman. Her muzzle was perhaps a bit shorter than his when it was his turn wearing that fur, a little narrower, but her dazzling eyes had not changed. The image in the shadow world was a reflection of a fine, fine reality. But the way she looked at him wasn't what he expected. She seemed *horrified* at the thought of looking at him, and she took a step back when he approached. "Hello, Danna," he said in a gentle, wistful tone.

Then, to his shock, she turned and bolted, fleeing towards the far side of the camp as fast as her two Arcan legs would carry her.

"Danna!" he called in surprise, taking a step forward.

"I think you startled her, my brother," Firetail told him calmly. "And unlike you, she detests what she is."

"Well, I'm not letting her do that," he said bluntly, bulling past the aged Shaman and running after her.

Danna was in shape, but she was nowhere near as conditioned as a Shaman. If she were to run on all fours, she could run faster than him, but her refusal to do so let him catch up to her about a hundred paces into the forest, where she slowed to a stop and leaned against a tree. She jumped

again when he grabbed hold of her shoulder, and his grip on her wouldn't let her break free. "Danna," he said sternly.

She dropped to her knees before the tree and put her hands over her face. "Don't look at me!" she said in a strangled tone, on the verge of tears.

"Stop being silly," he told her in a gentle yet firm voice, kneeling beside her. "I didn't care when you looked at me when I was an Arcan. Do you really think I care now that things are the other way?" he asked grabbing hold of her wrists and gently prying them away from her face. She snapped her head to the side, refusing to face him, refusing to look at him, so he put his hands on her shoulders and turned her body towards him. "I'm sorry I startled you, Danna," he apologized, "but this day was going to come eventually. I knew you were an Arcan, *she* told me, and that didn't stop me from coming, did it?" he asked. "I came to see *you*, you silly girl. And whether you're covered in fur, or you're human, you're still Danna to me. Now look at me."

"No," she answered in a quavering voice. "I'm ugly!"

"For an Arcan, you're quite handsome," he told her. "You wear that fur well."

She snapped a teary gaze at him, but now her eyes were full of sudden anger. "I'm wearing it because of *you* and that Trinity-damned spirit of yours!" she said with sudden heat, pushing at him chest. "Look at what she did to me! Look!"

"You don't want me to look at you, then you do?" he asked with a smile. "Well, if you take that shirt off, I might be able to see more."

She gave him a wild look, and he couldn't help but laugh helplessly when she started smacking him with her hands, almost like an angry little girl rather than a trained soldier. Despite slapping him like an angry child, she was still strong enough to knock him on his butt, where she lunged and tackled him, continuing to slap at his shoulders, chest, and head. He covered his face with his forearms, then gave out a whooshing cry when she

slammed both hands down on his lower chest. “Phwah!” he gasped, then he grabbed her hands and held them, felt her tail lashing against his knees. “Alright, miss mood swing, think we can get over this, sit down, and talk a while?” he asked.

Kyven had gained wisdom in more than one way. His goading of her, then his sudden peace offering, made her blink and look down at him, then the fur on her cheeks ruffled when she realized she was sitting on his stomach. Kyven knew Danna well enough to know how to get through her emotional wall and get her to be a little more rational. And his ploy worked. She quickly scrambled off his stomach, then sat down beside him, her face pensive and nervous at the same time. “I’m...I’m sorry,” she told him, looking away. “I didn’t expect to see you.”

“I should have warned you I was coming,” he offered. “Where are we, more or less?”

“You mean you don’t know?” she asked in surprise.

He shook his head when she looked at him. “I came looking for you. I found you, but I have no idea where you are. So I don’t know where I am,” he chuckled.

“We’re about twenty days northwest of Deep River, about to come out of the forest and out into those grasslands they tell me cut the forest in half through this region,” she answered him. “How did you get here?”

“I’ve learned how to shadow walk,” he told her. “I’m sure Clover told Firetail about it when she sent back a report.”

“Something like that, but we didn’t think you could go so far,” she said. “Clover just said you’d learned how to move through the shadows, and you use it to get past obstacles.”

“Distance doesn’t mean that much in there,” he told her. “How has it been?”

“Well, they try,” she said. “I can’t fault the Arcans for that. The conscripts aren’t very good at it, but they work hard.”

“No, Danna. How has it been?”

She looked away. “I *hate* this,” she growled, picking at the fur on her forearm. “I feel like everyone is staring at me all the time. I can’t walk very well. It took Firetail weeks to teach me to speak right. The fucking tail always seems to get in the way. And I feel like I’m a prisoner. Do you know what that bitch wants from me?” she said with sudden heat.

“No, she didn’t tell me.”

“She wants me to have *babies* like this!” she said with a strangled scream afterwards.

“What? How? There are no males.”

“I have no idea,” she growled. “But that’s her price for giving me back my humanity. I have to have Arcan babies and give them to Umbra so she can raise them. Well I won’t do it!” she declared hotly. “I won’t be her brood sow, no matter what it costs me!”

“That’s your choice, Danna,” he said carefully, thinking it over quickly. Clearly, she had more in mind than just him and Umbra. But the how of it was what he couldn’t figure out, unless she intended to wait for Umbra’s children to be old enough to father children...if she had a male child. That could very well be it, but he doubted it. The fox had to strike while Danna still hated being an Arcan, where she would swallow her pride and submit to a male to escape her Arcan state. Kyven knew from experience that an Arcan body was something one could get used to having, and Danna might very well mellow into it...or become resigned to it. “But either way, it won’t bother me all that much.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” she snapped.

“I’ve been there and done that,” he said. “I know it’s a little worse for you since you’d have to get pregnant and carry the baby to term, but I was

in your shoes not too long ago. Remember what Umbra was created to do.”

Danna frowned with a snarl, showing her fanged incisors. “You certainly didn’t seem to mind fucking that little whore.”

“I can’t deny that it wasn’t fun,” he admitted. “But I’m a guy. Our responsibility kinda ends as soon as we pull out, at least when it comes to what I had to do with her.”

She gave him a look, then settled back on one hand. “And is that all you feel about it?”

“Honestly? No,” he answered. “Even if they are Arcans, they’re still my children. I can’t help but want to get to know them, even if I’m not the same race as them anymore. I don’t know if I can be a father to them the way I’ve always imagined it, but I do want them to know who I am.”

“Well, you’re a better person than me,” she growled. “That fox bitch will just have to deal with disappointment. I’m not as weak as you. I won’t give in, even if I have to stay like this.”

“That’s between you and her, Danna,” he told her mildly. “I have no say in the matter. I guess I’ll have to get used to fur, though.”

She gave him a strange look.

“You think I care?” he asked. “At first I was attracted to your face and body, I’ll admit that. You’re *gorgeous*, Danna. But after I got to know you, I came to like the person behind the face. Think this matters to me?” he asked, reaching over and pinching the fur on her forearm. “You were Danna before, and you’re still Danna. You look a little different, I can’t deny that, but it doesn’t dissuade me at all.”

She gave him a startled look.

“Lightfoot calls me a pervert. Guess I am,” he said lightly, leaning back on his hands. “I don’t think you’re ugly, Danna. In fact, you’re strangely attractive like that. But you wouldn’t be half as attractive if it wasn’t *you* under that fur.”

She was quiet for a long, long time. He heard her tail slashing behind her as she stared at the hand not holding her up. “We’ll be in Deep River after they get there,” she said, changing the subject.

“What are you planning to do?”

“Let them settle in, then surround them,” she answered.

“No, Danna. What are you planning to do?”

She looked at him, and sighed. “I, I don’t know. I don’t want to fight my own people, Kyv. You know that. But what the Loremasters are trying to do, even if you don’t believe that machine bullshit, we can’t let it happen. If they establish in the Snake River valley, there’s gonna be a war, and the Arcans will lose. And...well, I have to admit. I think the Arcans *deserve* Haven. They need *someplace* that is theirs. Even despite that, we can’t let the Loremasters take over Noraam. That wasn’t what I enlisted into the Loreguard to do. I served to *help* people, not conquer them.”

“The truth will win out,” Kyven noted, pondering her position. “How many Loreguard would desert if they knew the truth of what they were doing?”

“I don’t know. I know the men in my unit wouldn’t like it, but we’re not really soldiers in the classic sense. I solve crimes, Kyven. That’s my job, or at least it used to be. The men in my unit are detectives, not soldiers, even if they have military rank and training. The rank and file, who knows?”

“Hmm, I might have to talk about that a little bit with *her*.”

“Do me a favor and kick her in the face.”

Kyven chuckled lightly. “I can’t touch her, but she can touch me. So my foot would go through her head, and she’d probably be pissed off that I tried to kick her in the face and do something about it.” He held out his arm to her, showing her a faint trio of scars on his forearm from her claws. “I have a few more of those in various places.”

“Why do you follow her, Kyven?” she asked suddenly. “You’re human again. You owe her nothing! Leave her and follow another spirit!”

“I know she’s evil, Danna,” he sighed, leaning back and laying down on the forest floor, looking up into the canopy. “But she *needs* me. And I need her, because I can’t *be* a Shaman without her. It’s hard to explain.”

“I think you have time,” she said frostily.

“Alright,” he said, collecting his thoughts a moment. “I know you know what a totem Shaman is.”

“Yeah. Most other Shaman aren’t attached to just one spirit, but you are. To *her*.”

“That’s part of why I stay with her. She’s my totem, Danna. *All* of my power comes from her. I have no magic without her. And in what’s going on over there on the other side of the mountains, they need me, Danna. Not to brag, but I can do things nobody else can do. They need me for what I can do. And because they need me, I will be there for them. That is the Shaman way, Danna. When we are needed, we will serve. They *need* me. The shadow fox *needs* me. And I *am* a Shaman, Danna. I may be human, but I’m just as much a Shaman as Firetail or Clover or Hardstep. It is who I am now. The shadow fox needs me. The spirits need me. The Arcans need me. The humans need me too. I am needed, and I will serve.

“That’s why I stay with her, Danna. Despite everything she’s done to me, despite the fact I know I mean nothing to her. I’ll endure that abuse if it means I can make a difference for the Arcans, and for the humans too. We didn’t want this war, but we have no choice. Now, I’ll do everything I can to end it as quickly as possible and with as little damage as possible to both sides, and afterwards I’ll work to keep the peace between the humans and the Arcans. Do I like it? No. I can’t say I entirely hate my spirit, but I certainly don’t like her all that much.”

“How can you *not* hate her?” she demanded.

“That’s hard to explain,” he said, scratching his shoulder. “Sure, I hate her in a way, but there’s, well, more there. I hate her, but I respect her. When she commands, I obey. I bow to her wisdom, because she’s wiser than I am, even if I don’t like her personally. And when she’s happy with my work, I feel pride. Not because I’m trying to please her, but because I know if she’s complementing me, then I must have truly done well. Anyway, that’s why I stay with her, Danna. Despite what she did to me, despite how I feel. She *needs* me. And Shaman go where they are needed.”

“You sound like them.”

“I *am* one of them now, Danna,” he told her calmly. “I’ve finished my Walk. I’m a Shaman, I now walk the path. This is now who I am. Is it so bad to you?”

She was quiet a moment. “No, I guess not. It’s just not really the same. You’re not the man I got to know in Haven.”

“We all change, Danna. Hopefully, I’ve changed for the better.”

“Well, I didn’t,” she growled, balling her clawed hand into a fist.

“It’s not all bad, you know,” he told her sagely. “You’re a shadow fox Arcan now, Danna. That means you have the same shadow powers I do.”

“I thought about that. I haven’t really tried to use them.”

“Well, they’re very handy. And if you decide to help the Arcans fight, I’d kinda like you to be able to use them. They make you very, very hard to kill, and I’m sorta personally interested in you staying alive.”

“You said nobody could teach you how they work.”

“Nope. And I can’t really teach you either. It’s something you need to learn for yourself. But, I can *show* you, so you know what you *can* do,” he said, looking at her and raising a hand. A small cloud of misty shadow formed around it. “I may be human, but the fox let me keep my shadow powers, so I guess I’m not *entirely* human anymore. That’s are how I

shadow walk, not Shaman magic. With practice and work, you could shadow walk too.”

That seemed to pique her curiosity. She sat up and looked at him. “Well, you can’t teach me, but show me what you can do. Everything. Even the stuff you didn’t show Umbra.”

“Umbra’s not capable of half of what I can do,” he said honestly. “Not because she doesn’t have the power, but because she just can’t understand it. And you have to be able to understand it to do it.”

And so, he walked her through everything he’d learned to do, from hiding within the shadow, to creating shadow, to manipulating shadow, all the way to shadow walking, though he didn’t demonstrate that to her. “It’s dangerous,” he told her when she protested. “Where I go isn’t empty, Danna. There are, well, *things* in there, and they see me as an invader. I’m not going to walk just to show you because it’ll tell those things where I am, and that means they’ll be closer when I go back in there to go back to my camp.” He smacked his head and laughed. “I hope my horse didn’t wander off,” he laughed. “I didn’t plan on coming here. I was practicing my shadow walking, thought of you, and well, here I am. I really should get back there. My camp is empty, and Strider is probably getting impatient.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I think I should. Tell Firetail I’m sorry for not visiting with her, but you needed my company more than she did.” Her cheek fur ruffled slightly. “But I can come back tomorrow. In fact, I think I should. I’ll give Firetail a detailed report, and I’m sure she wants to catch up. And I’d like to see you again.”

“I hate you seeing me this way,” she admitted, looking away from him.

“Danna, it does not bother me at all,” he said gently. “Because even though you’re a little different, you’re still Danna.” He leaned over, put his hand on her shoulder, and startled her by kissing her on the side of her muzzle. “Be safe, Danna. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She looked at him as he stood up and walk away, and then her eyes widened when shadow seemed to converge around him, and he was gone.

Getting back to his camp turned out to be a lot more exciting than Kyven intended, because the beings within the shadows were waiting on him to reappear when he returned to the shadow world. They were so close to him when he entered that he almost turned around and went right back out, but he couldn't afford to be trapped with the army with Strider unattended. So, he turned towards camp and literally ran within the shadow world, charging through misty shapes and through voids, ignoring the vertigo as best he could by focusing on one point, his camp, and running for it. Though distances meant little within the shadow world, the distance he had gone to see Danna did translate into quite a sprint to get back, and when he got there he could literally *see* the creatures. They were...chaos. That was the only way to describe them. Their forms were shadows like everything else, but they were darker, more distinct, more *real*. But the substance of their forms shifted, undulated, swirled and flowed within their forms like liquid, and their forms seemed to be as mutable as their interior. They were amorphous, changing shape by the second, and each of the five reached out for Kyven with a multitude of writhing tentacles.

It startled him, but he reacted without fear, by exerting his will against the shadow world to alter its dimensions. He pushed the *things* away from him by increasing the distance between him and them, making their tentacles reach further and further and further without getting any closer to him. Almost immediately, he felt the intense pressure and resistance of the shadow world to this wholesale alteration of its natural state, and he was forced to exert almost all his concentration on pushing the creatures back even as he split his attention enough to focus on the shadows to converge a gateway leading back into the real world, which he had to do because the tentacles kept coming and coming as if the creatures could stretch them into infinity. He backed into the gate even as he pulled it around him, never taking his eyes off those writhing entities, and he could almost feel their fury when he fell out of their world and escaped them once more.

Fell happened to be literal. He appeared from the shadows nearly five rods above the ground, and turned head over heels to land roughly on his stomach in the grass next to his unlit fire pit. He climbed to his hands and knees and shook his head to clear out the stars of the hard landing, inwardly relieved. That was *close*. Too close. The fox had said that if he could see them, he was in serious trouble, and now he understood why. If they could see him, they were in striking distance of him. Only his nearly reflexive response to their attack saved his life.

He rolled over and sat down, blew out his breath, and silently counted his blessings even as he made sure he didn't break his nose. It was bleeding quite liberally from being plowed into the ground, forcing him to lay back down on the grass to keep from dribbling blood all over his clothes. He turned his head towards where Strider had been picketed—though it was more correct to say where Kyven asked him to stay, since the Equar was strong enough to pull a tree out of the ground if he was serious about getting free of his tether—and saw a rather curious scene. Strider was there, and flanking him were two massive yet sleek canines, one ebon black and the other charcoal gray. The Lupans. They were all clustered around a carcass laying before them, the carcass of a rather large cow or bull of some kind, almost too big to be a cow but too small to be a Tauron, sharing it with the Equar. That seemed a strange sight, but Equars were omnivorous, not herbivorous like horses...but what was strange was that the Lupans were sharing their meal with the Equar instead of trying to eat the Equar.

Then again, if he was a Lupan, trying to kill an Equar would be high on his list of things not to do. Strider was frolicsome and playful, but he was a powerful, powerful animal, and unlike horses and other animals of his ilk, Strider was not afraid of a Lupan, which was smaller than he was. He would fight before he ran, and his massive size, steel-hard hooves, deadly fanged maw, and great strength meant that anything that wanted to eat him wasn't going to get his meal without getting severely injured. Besides, the Lupans had seen him riding Strider, and Clover said they were actually rather smart. Hopefully they saw Strider as Kyven's companion, and as

such was not on the menu. Perhaps them sharing their kill with Strider was something of a peace offering.

“I hope you saved some for me,” Kyven called, pinching his nose shut with his fingers and sitting back up. He channeled enough heat to light his fire, then became very still when the ebon Lupan padded over to him. He felt like a child looking up at a mastiff, for the Lupan towered over him with him sitting on the ground. It leaned in and sniffed at his face, then a tongue the size of a bread pan slurped over the side of his face. He laughed and flinched away from the tongue, but stopped laughing when a huge paw pushed against his chest, trying to push him down, and it was not gentle.

This was not play. This was a test of strength. Kyven pushed back against the huge animal, using his Shaman-honed strength, then bulled up to his feet. The big canine reared up and put his paws on Kyven’s shoulders, but Kyven held up against the weight, even used the hand not keeping his nose from bleeding to push back against the Lupan’s chest. The Lupan continued to paw and lick at him for a good minute, never hostile but not quite friendly, which Kyven endured without much difficulty, proving that he was neither threat nor weakling.

When the Lupan reared up and then backed up enough to return to all fours, returning to its meal, Kyven pondered just how he knew what it was doing. Maybe it was related with his unusual understanding of wild Arcans, some kind of curious affinity for wildlife. Kyven just *knew* how to approach wild Arcans without them attacking him, and now he just *knew* how to respond to the Lupan’s test of him. Was it something to do with the shadow fox, or something else? Maybe it had to do with him being a Shaman. Either way, it was something to ponder some other time.

After he got his nose to stop bleeding, he decided to test his acceptance by the black Lupan, which was dominant over the gray one, by approaching the kill. The two Lupans, and even Strider for that matter, gave him a cool, not entirely friendly look as he knelt by the back of the big cow, but his eyes were resolute and his body language was not passive. None of them did anything when he set his knife to the carcass and peeled away the hide

to get at the flesh beneath, then he settled down and started eating, joining them in an ancient tradition of acceptance among carnivores, the sharing of a kill.

Perhaps they didn't care because what Kyven could eat from their kill was barely two mouthfuls for any of the three of them. Kyven ate his fill and returned to the fire, unrolling the map Danvers gave him and plotting his route through the southern marches of the Free Territories. There were no large cities until he reached Rallan, just a series of small farm villages where tobacco was brought to be sold, and the efforts of the farmers were financed by merchants who catered to their needs. The army behind him would veer to the east to avoid Rallan, probably at Lake Char, which was considered the border between the Free Territories and Carin. At that point, Kyven would go southwest to Rallan, to speak to the king and also to see if there was any way he could delay or divert the Rallan garrison of Loreguard, who by now had undoubtedly received word of the attack and knew that the attackers had fled south, towards them. He expected to see quite a few Loreguard patrols on the road, searching for the attackers, just as they were doing along the Penbrook road. That many patrols was not normal, they were searching for any sign of the men who had attacked Riyan. But what the patrols didn't expect was that the attackers were coming cross country, moving along long-forgotten back roads, natural trails, and voids between plantations. Danvers' tactic of sending out parties and sacking every plantation within a day's ride made it impossible for the Loreguard to plot plantation attacks and use them as a means to find the army, even as it concealed the true numbers of the army from the Loreguard.

The two Lupans warily approached the fire, giving it furtive looks, then they sat down flanking Kyven, looking down at his map with impassive eyes. "So, I wonder what brought you two into the camp, given you've been following me ever since I left the army," he told the two of them absently. "Wouldn't be because I vanished from the camp and you couldn't figure out where I went or how I did it, was it? Then Strider gave you a lesson in manners when you came in to investigate, no doubt," he

chuckled. “So you brought him your kill to get on his good side so you could see where I went, eh?”

The two large animals remained silent, then the gray laid down beside him.

“Were you a mean Equar, Strider?” he called to the animal, who was still at the carcass.

Strider gave a passive snort and returned to his meal.

“Well, I don’t really expect you two to hang around,” he said, mainly to himself. “Now that you know where I am, you’ll probably wander back into the forest during the night. But, just so you know, I’m going that way,” he said lightly, pointing south.

Both the gray and the black Lupan raised their heads, sniffing at the slight breeze. Then the gray stood up. Kyven looked back to Strider, who had his head up, his ears pricked.

That tore it. There was someone out there.

He rolled up his map, quickly kicked off his boots, and then hunkered down and enacted the power of his foxhead medallion. He felt that icy cold sensation flow through him, like his bones turned to cold water, and he took Danna’s shadow fox body and gave her his human one. He couldn’t meld to the shadows in his clothes, but the Arcan form lent itself a different set of senses. Once he was settled into the Arcan body, he lifted his muzzle and tested the faint breeze for unusual smells.

Human scents. Very faint.

The two Lupans quickly loped into the forest on silent paws, leaving Kyven to consider how he wanted to go about this. He was camped pretty well off the road, but his fire’s smoke and light in the twilight may attract them. They could be Loreguard patrollers or just locals on their way home, but either way they were moving in his direction. He decided to be passive about it, returning to his human form, then shivering the goosebumps away

as the cold washed through him. He left his boots off, wrapped himself in the illusion of the horse rancher, and leaned against his saddle. “Steady, Strider,” he called softly. “I know they’re there. Let’s wait and see what they do.”

A few moments later, he found out. It was a patrol of Loreguard, twelve of them, and they had moved into the forest to investigate the fire, it seemed. They were on foot, but Kyven could hear horses stamping their feet nearby, no doubt wary at the smell of blood and the proximity of two Lupans, who preyed on horses. They came through the forest from the road, which was to Kyven’s left; he knew better than to put his bedroll on the far side of the fire, where its light would blind him to their approach. “Good evening, gentlemen,” Kyven called amiably. “What brings you here?”

“Investigating your fire, traveler,” the officer among them answered. “We weren’t sure if it was man-made or a small forest fire just starting.”

“It’s been dry enough for them,” Kyven said calmly.

“Might I ask—what the hell is that?” the officer gasped when he saw Strider.

“It’s an Equar, Lieutenant,” Kyven answered calmly. “My horse.”

“I thought they were too wild to ride.”

“Not if you get them as newborns and raise them with regular horses, they’re not,” Kyven answered. “I suggest you keep your distance. He’s a bit snippy when he’s eating.”

As if to prove the point, Strider gave the twelve men a flat, challenging look, then rather aggressively buried his nose in the carcass. The sound of snapping bones was clearly audible from within the ribcage of the dead cow.

The officer gave the Equar a long look. “Who might you be, traveler, and what business are you pursuing?”

“I’m Van Steady, a rancher out Avannar way,” he answered immediately. “I’m on my way to Rallan to look at some potential ranchland. I just came through Penbrook and inspected some land west of there, but I don’t think it’s what I want.”

That information seemed to satisfy the officer, whose body language was much less aggressive now. “Well, we need to set up ourselves, and this looks like a good place.”

“Not if you have horses,” Kyven answered immediately. “And not if you have itchy trigger fingers.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want you shooting my wolves,” he answered.

“Wolves?”

Kyven’s illusion nodded simply. “I don’t travel alone, Lieutenant. I raise wolves as well as horses, and I have some with me. They’re why I knew you were coming. They’re back in the trees a bit, which is why those horses I hear are skittish. My Equar is used to wolves. Your horses aren’t. So, you’re welcome at my fire, but you’ll have to put your horses somewhere else and kindly not shoot at my wolves if they come up close to camp.”

For some reason, the very word *wolf* was enough to make even a grown man fret, and these Loreguard seemed to be no different. The men in the patrol started looking into the forest, and Kyven was quick to use his shadow powers even as he channeled an illusion, making the shadows beyond the trees shift and take on lupine shapes, which then prowled the very edge of the lit perimeter of the small clearing.

The patrol leader looked around, looked at his men, then took a step back. “That cow there wasn’t from a farm, was it?”

Kyven’s illusion shook its head. “There’s a bunch of wild ones around here. A couple of Tauron too, if you’re of a mind to chase them down.

Tauron sell pretty well at the cattle fairs.”

The officer nodded. “I think we should set up far enough away that your wolves don’t keep our horses from getting any rest,” he reasoned. “Do you need anything, Master Steady?”

“Nah, but thanks for asking. Good night to you, Lieutenant.”

“Same to you, citizen,” he replied, and then the patrol backed out of his clearing almost as if there were enemy soldiers training shockrods at them from the trees.

Kyven didn’t pay the patrol much more mind, though he knew from here on he’d have to hide behind the illusion of Van Steady, as now the Equar was coupled to that persona. But, that wasn’t all that big of a deal, since the rancher illusion seemed perfect for moving south anyway. He could stop in at the plantations south of his location, chat with the plantation owners, and quietly take stock of the dispensation of the plantations.

Not a problem. Sometimes hiding in plain sight was the best possible place to hide.

Kyven did as Danvers needed of him the next day. He visited the plantations that extended south from Penbrook, which were sprawled almost haphazardly along a series of wagon tracks and country roads which crisscrossed the forest, but also interconnected in a way that allowed one who knew the back roads a means of going south without going cross country, but also without being seen by anything but a handful of people. These farm roads were only used when the plantations or small farms out in the piedmont needed supplies from a village, so they were lonely places where one might only see one wagon all day. Clover’s map allowed him to avoid the two tiny hamlets hidden among the forests out here, which the army behind him also intended to avoid.

The reason the plantations were staggered out like that was simple economics. These plantations were settled long ago by squatter families

who saw potential and simply claimed the land, farmed it, and expanded over the years. The best sites for farming were taken by those who got there first, mainly along Tobacco Road, so the families that came later, when the tobacco rush had first begun, had to settle for whatever land they could find that was viable for tobacco farming. The result out here in the piedmont wasn't an orderly series of plantations laid out to maximize land use, but a mishmash of erratic borders with tracts of unclaimed forest between them, and often quite lively disputes between farm families where those borders touched. Not everyone was willing to farm out here, where it could be half a day to a village and several days from a major town like Riyan, so there were still plenty of available land. Because of that, the farms and plantations that were out here didn't build right up against each other, but instead wherever the land was best suited for tobacco and with lots of empty land separating them.

Kyven visited them one by one as he moved south, and at each one he did what was needed. He found out how many Arcans there were, how many humans there were to guard them, and what kind of supplies or materials the army might be able to use. He also spread his gospel, as it were, warning the people about the coming war in the form of his determination to move his herds away from Avannar and his concern about why the Loremasters had amassed so many men in Riyan. After seeding that doubt in the minds of the plantation workers and owners, he mounted Strider and rode off no matter what he was offered to stay, stating with steely determination that his livelihood depended on getting his herds out of Avannar as quickly as possible.

Before the armies arrived, those rumors would spread behind him. That was how things worked out here. The plantations he visited would spread those rumors to those he didn't, until the word was all over the southern territories. It wouldn't stop the war or dissuade the Loreguard, but what it would do would be to motivate the citizens to consider the possibility of war, and perhaps make a few quiet preparations to either move or bunker down. It would also make those that took Kyven's warning about the

Loremasters to heart to carefully consider any request or demand made on them by Loremasters or Loreguard.

He did camp early, this time camping well away from any road in a clearing so small there was barely room for him and the Equar, then he warned Strider not to wander as he stepped into the shadow world and started out for Danna.

That was itself a lesson. By the time he found her, he sensed the *things* very close to him, and he came to understand that while he could travel any distance within the shadow world, the further he went, the faster they could find him. If he entered and just stood in one place, they couldn't find him as quickly as they could when he traveled distance. That seemed strange to him, almost contradictory, but the rules in the shadow world were different from what he would expect. He pondered the idea of moving in small stages when he returned instead of trying to traverse the entire distance at once, but something told him that that wouldn't work either.

He stepped out of the shadows to see the army setting up camp for the night, having appeared behind a small oak tree that was literally right on the edge of a sea of grass to the south. The army had reached the edge of the forest, where Clover said a forest fire long ago had converted forest to grassland, and the army was setting up out in that grass, far enough from the forest so as not to trample the saplings that were taking root at the edge, proof that the forest was steadily reclaiming the territory it had lost to the fire. Danna and Firetail were sitting on horses surveying the construction of the tent city some distance from where he was, and they hadn't noticed him step out of the forest. The Arcans camping nearest the forest, however, did. They stopped what they were doing and greeted him with kind and enthusiastic words, all reverence and smiles, and he passed quite a few blessings about himself as he moved through the camp towards Danna. All of Haven knew of Kyven Steelhammer, the human Shaman, and the fact that he was human didn't seem to bother most of them. Oddly enough, the most resistance he seemed to encounter was among the Shaman themselves, such as it was. They may not approve of a human, but he was accepted by the Spirits, he walked the path, and they respected him for that acceptance.

Remembering the rather awkward meeting from yesterday, the wise part of Kyven understood that this time, perhaps, a slightly different approach was needed. He stopped about two hundred rods from Danna and Firetail, among the Arcans who still clamored around him, bent down and took off his boots, and then he used the amulet that his totem had given him to take on the Arcan shape. He felt his fur stand up from the cold that flowed through his bones as he took Danna's burden from her, felt his tail snake through the rather cleverly concealed flap that he'd cut into them to accommodate it, so he could take the Arcan shape while still in his clothes.

Again, Firetail seemed to sense him first. She turned towards the commotion among the tents and smiled when he appeared among the Arcans, still touching hands and blessing any who asked it of him, happily performing one of the duties of the Shaman by comforting the Arcans. In a way, the Shaman were the clergy of the Arcans as much as they were their guides, and sometimes their leaders. Haven may be ruled by the council, but the council acceded to the words of Firetail. In her way, Firetail was the true ruler of the Arcans of Haven, though she rarely exercised that power. That was not the Shaman way. Shaman were guides, not rulers, who only took up the mantle of leadership when necessary...like right now. Firetail nudged Danna and pointed, and the two of them watched him as he emerged from a cluster of Arcans, pausing to bless a very small female canine Arcan. He walked up to their horses and smiled in the Arcan way. "Hello Firetail. Hello Danna."

"Kyven," Firetail smiled, dismounting and advancing to him. They took hands, and she licked him fondly on the cheek. "I should be offended that you had no time for me yesterday, but at least you came back today your much more handsome self," she winked.

"Please," he snorted, looking up at Danna. "I told you I'd be back," he told her.

She looked down at him, her expression curiously unreadable, then she flushed slightly and put her bare feet back in the stirrups of her saddle.

“Kyven,” she returned, a bit distantly. “We should have some dinner ready soon.”

“Sounds good, but I’m afraid we have to take care of business before pleasure,” he said, looking back to Firetail. “Let’s go to your fire and talk.”

“I already have things ready.”

Firetail and Danna took him to a large fire burning outside a large pavilion tent that had to be Danna’s command tent. Kyven found himself not just in their company, however, for six other Shaman were sitting around the fire. Coldfoot and Stalker were there, which surprised him a little bit, and they were sharing company with four other Shaman he knew fairly well from Haven, Hardstep, Patience, Dancer, and Tallspan, as well as two Shaman Kyven did not know well. One was a tall, lanky male cougar Kyven knew as Longtooth, and the other was a raccoon female that reminded him a little of Teacup, since she was rather petite. Kyven nuzzled his way through them, even accepting a curt nuzzle from Stalker, and then took his seat between Firetail and Danna as they settled and Patience channeled a cozy fire. He accepted a plate of raw venison from Firetail, who took it from a young red vixen Arcan whose hands were trembling. Kyven then explained things in far more detail about what he was doing than Clover could, since she wasn’t there, telling them about his movements south in front of the army and what he was finding. Firetail and the Shaman were much more interested in things that didn’t matter to Danvers as much, such as the welfare of the Arcan slaves and any signs that crystals were starting to become scarce in lieu of the Loremaster invasion of the western frontier. “It’s Arcans that are scarce,” Kyven answered. “Every plantation I’ve visited, they’re complaining that the kennels are empty. Between what we did and the Loremasters trying to gather Arcans for their westward march, there’s not an Arcan to be found in any kennel anywhere in the Free Territories.”

“Thank the spirits for that,” Patience sighed.

“I should be in Rallan in three days,” he continued. “The army’s going to avoid Rallan, but I want to go in to look things over, see how many men the Loreguard have there, and I think I’m going to stop by and pay a visit to the king. I think he needs to learn a few truths.”

“That will be very dangerous, young Shaman,” Firetail told him.

“It’s what I’ve been trained to do, Firetail,” he said simply. “If I couldn’t get in to see him, I think my spirit would bite me in a very uncomfortable place. If I can get into the Loremasters’ headquarters, I should be able to get into the palace to see him.”

“Still, you should be careful, my brother,” Tallspan told him, the huge wolf, who looked a lot like Stalker now that he could see them at the same time, warned.

“That’s why I’m glad you’re here, Longtooth,” Kyven addressed the cougar. “I need as detailed a map as you can give me about the Carin roads.”

“I’ve already made one for Clover. I can make a copy for you, brother,” he nodded.

“I also need everything you know about Rallan. I’ve never been there, and I’m not going to have time to study the town before I go in. I need to know where everything is before I get there.”

“Not a problem. I can even give you the floorplans of the palace.”

“That will help,” he said brightly. “Danvers wants me to try to draw off the Loreguard garrison to the west so they can slip by to the east. I think I can do it, or at the very least make them look in one direction for a few days. Before I do that, though, I want to get to the king and have a little talk with him. Explain what’s happening so he knows what’s really going on. I doubt he’ll help us, but I’m sure Danvers would be happy if he didn’t help them.”

“The humans need to know the truth,” Firetail said. “Now that the Loremasters know about us and about Haven, we have to spread the truth to those who need to hear it. And King Longwell of Carin is one of those men.”

“Exactly,” Kyven nodded. “The Loremasters have poisoned humanity against the Shaman. I doubt that’s going to change any time this century, but if we can make some inroads with the leaders of Noraam, keep them from being hostile to us, it might help us in the long run. They can issue orders that the common man will obey, even if they don’t understand or agree with them.”

“A wise thought,” the little raccoon nodded appreciatively. “You have certainly walked far, my brother.”

“Thank you, sister,” he said modestly.

“That it comes from a *human* Shaman might make it more potent,” Dancer added thoughtfully.

“If there’s anything I can do, that’s probably it, Dancer,” Kyven agreed. “I’m in a sort of unique position here, a bridge between the two societies. Maybe they’ll listen to me where they wouldn’t listen to an Arcan.”

“Well, you are certainly accepted in ours,” Coldfoot smiled at him.

“That comforts me, brother,” Kyven said mildly.

A dinner of a thick, hearty buffalo stew was brought to the fire, and they all enjoyed a sumptuous dinner without much conversation. After dinner, Kyven explained in further detail what the army was doing, what he was doing, and Danvers’ plans. Where Clover could send messages, Kyven could answer questions, allow Firetail and the others to probe into the depths of the plan to fully understand it and consider it. He was a bit startled when, after they finished discussing it as Shaman, the little raccoon whose name was Rings reached over and put her hand on his wrist. “When you go back, brother, take me with you.”

He started. "That's dangerous, sister," he told her. "I'm still learning how it works, and if I bring another, it'll put both of us in greater danger."

"Be that as it may, Clover could use help, brother," she returned. "It's worth the risk to put a second Shaman with the army. If you're willing to take that risk, brother, then so am I."

He shook his head. "I can't do it, sister," he told her. "I'm not even sure *how* to do it. I'm not ready to try something like that yet."

"You're sure?"

"Positive," he affirmed. "I'm willing to try when I'm ready, but it's just too dangerous. I don't know enough to be confident we'll survive to get back."

"Very well, but when you're ready, I will be here."

"That's good enough, sister." He looked to Danna. "How are things looking for this side?"

"It looks about where it was yesterday," she answered.

"We have a friendly spirit watching the advancing army," Firetail told him. "We know exactly where they are and how fast they're going."

"From the looks of it, they'll beat us to Deep River by two days," Danna continued. "Then we'll just surround them and starve them until they surrender. The Shaman promise they can cut off all communications from the army, even fake some."

"We're going to send back false reports that the army is alright," Tallspan told Kyven. "That should delay any attempt to send reinforcements before the army in Deep River surrenders."

"Clever," Kyven nodded.

"Thank your Danna for it," he grinned.

“If all goes well, we can capture the army without a single shot fired, and we’re going to need it. We can’t risk a single soldier taking Deep River, because we’re going to need them to defend Haven when the retaliatory expedition comes over the mountains.”

“A wise concern,” Firetail agreed. “This is not the greatest danger to Haven, it is what comes after, when the Loremasters and Noraam learn just what truly exists west of the Smoke Mountains.”

They broke up after little more conversation, and Kyven went straight to Danna. She seemed just as reluctant as that look she gave him when he first arrived, and she sat quietly with him by the fire after the other Shaman left. They sat in silence for nearly a full minute, then she blew out her breath. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

She reached out and pinched the fur on his wrist.

Kyven chuckled. “I guess I’m a little more used to it than you are,” he told her. “Does it bother you seeing me like this?”

“It’s...confusing,” she admitted. “You may be an Arcan right now, but that’s just because you’re taking it from me. I got used to it when we were in Haven, got used to seeing you like that. On you, it, well, it looks kinda *normal*. But I know it’s not. You’re the human, and now I’m the Arcan, and I’m stuck like this forever.”

“Maybe not,” he told her.

“Oh yes I am,” she said hotly. “There’s no way in fucking hell I’m being a brood sow for that *bitch*.”

“Well, maybe time will change things,” he said patiently. “No deal is set in stone. Perhaps you can change the terms with her.”

“How?” she snorted acidly.

“By outwaiting her,” he answered. “She’s wise, and if you prove she’s not going to intimidate you, well, you might be able to renegotiate your deal. If all she wants is shadow fox Arcan children, well, you have something she wants.”

“What is that?”

“The very fact that you’re the Arcan,” he told her. “What she did to create Umbra isn’t something she can just do over and over, Danna. You own something she had to do a *lot* to make, and that gives you a bargaining chip. If she wants more Arcans, and you own one of only two means to produce them, so then you have something *she* wants. Use that. Force a new bargain that restores your humanity in exchange for what she needs, or threaten to hold it hostage until you get what you want. Spirits may be immortal, but the fact you’re not puts a sense of immediacy into it for her she can’t ignore.”

Danna considered that for a moment, then laughed ruefully. “That’s pretty fuckin’ devious.”

“Guile and deceit, Danna,” he smiled. “Guile and deceit. You can’t win *anything* against her without being devious. All you need is a patsy.”

“A what?”

“Like I said, you’re not getting out of this without being devious, Danna. Find a human woman who *is* willing to be the brood sow. Ask Firetail to make you a small fortune in crystals, and offer to pay her that king’s ransom in exchange for her, ah, services. That way the fox gets what she wants, you get what you want, and the patsy gets what she wants. Everyone’s happy.” He chuckled. “Obviously, this may have to wait a while, at least until after this war is over. And with you stuck as an Arcan, well, maybe I’ll have to look into it for you. If you want, that is.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ll find the patsy if you’re willing to make the deal,” he told her.

“You’d do that for me?”

“I care about you, Danna,” he said, putting his clawed hand on her knee. “Of course I’d do it for you. And unlike you, I’m not fettered by any sense of morality about it,” he said with a toothy grin. He manifested an illusion around himself, an illusion of him in his human form. And since he was so intimately familiar with his human self, he was able to imprint tremendous believability into the illusion, making it as real as real could be in almost every respect. “I’m willing to be a little dirty if means we end up back the way we started, Danna,” he said. “I...I still want to see if *us* can work. I’ve never stopped wanting it.”

She gave him a surprisingly shy look, then reached out and touched the back of his hand. She gasped when she touched it, then grabbed it and felt along his wrist and palm. “You—how did you do that!” she gasped. “There’s no fur!”

“I can be whatever you want me to be, Danna,” he told her impulsively. Clearly, his own belief in his illusion was enough to overcome her innate disbelief in it, causing his illusion to fool her senses. “That’s what being a master of illusions is all about, you know,” he chuckled.

She reached out and touched his face, putting her hand on his muzzle, but the way she pressed against the side of it was like she was ignoring the muzzle, trying to touch his human nose and cheek. Her eyes seemed a trifle confused for a moment, then they darkened in a strange manner. “There’s just skin,” she said, touching his face. “No muzzle, no fur, just skin.”

“It’s just an illusion, Danna,” he told her. “I’m still the same underneath.”

Her dark eyes literally *smoldered* at him. “I don’t believe you...” she said, then she looked around. She grabbed his hand, stood up, and pulled him quickly and urgently towards a row of tents.

“Danna!” he said in surprise. “What are you doing?”

“What I’ve been wanting to do since Riyan,” she answered hastily. “I’m not wasting this chance, not while we’re both human and we won’t be the same again for a long time.”

Kyven tried to object, he tried to explain, but that wasn’t very easy with Danna being so unlike herself. She dragged him into her tent, and came close to raping him. There was no debating with her, no discussing. It was as if her lust had taken complete control over her, but in a way, Kyven wasn’t being too aggressive about putting her off. He’d been lusting after Danna since he met her, and he wasn’t about to say no. She seemed not put off in the slightest despite his repeated warnings that he was still Arcan under the illusion, and he maintained the illusion through it all, felt her gripping his fur even as she said it was skin, felt her press her cheek against his muzzle and say nothing as he consummated a year of desire for this woman, felt her under him, felt himself inside her, and felt that it had been worth every second’s worth of waiting. She was just as passionate, just as intense, and making love to her was like a thousand lightning bolts roiling through his body because she was so demanding, so sensual, so aroused. He was careful not to gouge her with his claws, gripping the blankets tightly as he climaxed within her, then collapsing atop her as they panted to recover afterwards.

Once he recovered his breath, he rolled off of her and started gathering his clothes. He’d been gone too long as it was, and he needed to get back to Strider. “Danna,” he started.

“No,” she said. “Not a word. Don’t ruin the moment.”

“I told you this is an illusion,” he said to her honestly.

“And I told you I don’t believe you. Or, I don’t *want* to believe you,” she said calmly. “I felt what I wanted to feel, and touched what I wanted to touch. And I liked it,” she declared.

That surprised him. She *knew* he was Arcan under the illusion, but she decided to accept the illusion as her reality, and that made it as real to her as it needed to be. To her, she touched only skin, ran her hands over human

features, not Arcan ones, and to his surprise she had had that much sexual attraction to him that she was willing to ignore the fact that he was Arcan under the illusion to finally take what she had been wanting from him for months, and it made finally having sex with her nearly explosive in its intensity.

“It was definitely worth the wait,” he winked at her.

“Not another word,” she said. “I know you have to go. So go. And I’ll see you again...but don’t expect *this* every time you visit.”

He laughed and dismissed the illusion. “I’ll take whatever you give me, Danna,” he said, kneeling down and licking her cheek. “Are you ready?”

She looked up at him, and nodded. He then returned to the human shape, and he got his first chance to see it happen from the outside as he watched Danna change even as he changed himself. The human Kyven knelt down and kissed the Arcan Danna on the muzzle, then she gasped when he ghosted his hand over her furry breast. “This wouldn’t have mattered to me,” he whispered huskily in her ear.

“You’re a pervert,” she teased without any heat in her voice.

“Then I’m a pervert,” he agreed, grabbing her breast firmly and fondling it. “I told you, Danna, I’m attracted to what’s under this fur. I’d climb right back into those blankets and between your legs in heartbeat if I didn’t have to get back to my camp.”

“If I let you.”

“Oh, would you?” he grinned, reaching down and fondling her genitals, which made her suck in her breath.

“Go!” she barked, slapping lightly at his hand.

He laughed, and while still holding onto his clothes, the shadows rose up from the tent, surrounded him, and carried him away.

Danna blew out her breath and lashed her tail savagely. She wasn't sure if she'd done the right thing. It felt, well, like she wasn't being honest with him. But then again, that was....

Wow. She'd used the human illusion as an excuse, but despite knowing that he was Arcan, she had really felt human skin, and couldn't feel his claws or his muzzle. She had *wanted* to believe he was human, and that made him feel human to him.

And...*shit*. That was, was, wow. Just wow.

She looked to the side, where the shadows seemed to darken, and then a pair of emerald points of light appeared within them. The shadows seemed to recede to reveal that hated bitch spirit, the shadow fox, sitting with her tail wrapped around her front legs sedately. "*Wisely done, human,*" her voice came audibly into the tent.

"I hate you, you bitch."

"I am sure you know how little that matters to me, human," she sniffed lightly. *"I will uphold my part of the bargain as soon as you complete yours. You were wise to submit. Despite what my Shaman told you, I would have watched you die before giving up what is mine. And you, like him, are mine."*

Danna could only stew silently in her fury, for there was no answer to that statement that would make her feel better, even as she watched the fox's form dissolve into the shadow, leaving only her glowing eyes. And then those too were gone, leaving her alone in the tent with nothing but her fears, reservations, thoughts, and worries.

She put her hand to her furry belly, and wondered if she'd truly done the right thing.

But there was no answer to that question. None at all.

Chapter 10

Longtooth's maps proved to be invaluable. They were dead-on accurate and allowed Kyven to navigate the back roads of the southern Free Territories using Clover's maps, then the back roads of northern Carin using Longtooth's maps. Two days ago, Kyven had finished scouting plantations for the army behind him, and was now making haste to Rallan to both warn the king and also do something to try to distract or mislead the sizable garrison of Loreguard present in the city.

The army behind him was now so large that it couldn't hide anymore. The two thousand human mercenaries were now backed up by about five thousand Arcans, Arcans armed with literally anything they could find for them to use. All the Briton rifles had been handed out, and the two thousand or so Arcans who didn't have a rifle were armed with weapons taken from plantations and villages they had invaded on the way south. Those Arcans were armed with alchemical weapons, muskets, pistols, bows, and some were armed with swords and farm implements since there simply wasn't anything else left. Danvers was using those Arcans as reserves, and was also surreptitiously putting the smallest, weakest, most timid, and the Arcans too conditioned to be slaves into those roles both to keep them out of combat and also give his army the best chance of success. They were actively being pursued now by the Loreguard that had detached from the main force and were moving south, but the army was going to find that catching up to Danvers wasn't going to be easy. Every human was mounted, all their supplies were on horses instead of wagons, and the Arcans were just as mobile as the horses. This mobility was Danvers' secret weapon, the ability to either outrun or at least keep pace with any pursuit, which meant that the army chasing them, should nothing go wrong, wasn't going to catch them until it was a place and time of Danvers' choosing. Since there was now a big trail of ransacked plantations and villages that had seen the army

pass for them to follow, part of Kyven's mission in Rallan was to make sure the Rallan garrison couldn't march east and block them, then let them get pincered between two armies and get slaughtered. From the messages delivered to him by Danvers and Clover, the army was progressing both in moving towards Cheston and also in training the Arcans to be soldiers. Despite being slaves for hundreds of years, Arcans were genetically disposed to being soldiers, since they were literally created to be soldiers, and that basic programming was starting to show itself both in the Arcans Danvers was leading and the Arcans marching towards Deep River. They may not know how to fight, but other aspects of a good soldier such as teamwork and an awareness of the unit as a whole were already there, and those were important, if esoteric, qualities.

Arcans were possessed of a pack mentality, and the pack in this respect was the army.

But that wasn't Kyven's immediate concern. He was only one day out from Rallan, and Strider ambled down a back road carrying what looked to the farmers that watched him pass by to be a grizzled middle-aged man in fine clothes and with graying hair. The illusion of Van Steady had made good time south, and had taken on more and more personality as Kyven stayed within the illusion, fleshing out the persona until it was almost as good as a real person. What worried the farmers more, however, were the two monstrously huge canines that padded along behind the Equar, wolf-like animals the size of a large pony. Most of the farmers had never seen a Lupan before, but some of them saw that they looked wolf-like enough to be worried about them. The two Lupans had abandoned their isolation from Kyven two days ago and had started openly traveling with him when they moved into much more populated territory, somehow sensing that they were actually safer with Kyven than they were skulking the narrow bands of forest between farms down here in Carin, where there was much less cover, many more humans, and more opportunities for the two big canines to run into trouble. That they understood this enough to follow Kyven openly said much about their innate intelligence; they were *much* smarter than the common canine.

Kyven slowed Strider enough to consult his map without having it bounce all over the place. In about two minars he'd turn onto another road, a tiny village occupying the crossroads where the two lanes crossed. Longtooth's map didn't give a name to the hamlet, but it would be a good place to stop for a brief rest and restock on some sundries...at least so long as the villagers didn't try to chase the Lupans out with torches and pitchforks. How those two approached entering a human village would tell Kyven how serious they were about following him.

He hadn't gone to see Danna since—well, since she more or less rocked his world. It wasn't that he was avoiding her after they'd been intimate, it was that he'd been too busy to make the trip and also he was giving *them* a few days to settle down before he tried that again. For a second time, he was very nearly caught by those things in the shadow world on his way back from Danna, and he again had to resort to serious measures to protect himself. He made sure to have Clover send a message back to Danna that he wouldn't be able to visit for a few days to make sure she knew he wasn't avoiding her, and he fully intended to go see her once he got to Rallan.

“Keep calm, you two,” Kyven called back as the hamlet appeared around a gentle bend in the country road. It was a tiny little place, a collection of about ten houses, a tavern, and a small general store and livery clustered around an intersection between two rutted, poorly maintained back roads in rural northern Carin. The two Lupans, seeing the hamlet, turned and bounded into the woods rather than enter the village.

So much for that.

A few kids scurried out and followed the Equar as he ambled into the village, slowing to a walk as Kyven identified the combination livery/general store and pointed him in that direction, more or less ignoring the excited questions the kids babbled at him. There was a curious lack of enslaved Arcans, he noticed, not seeing a single collared Arcan among the houses. He did see one, however, as an almost unnaturally thin, naked, bedraggled, very young red fox vixen Arcan padded wearily out of the

general store, carrying a large basket of what looked like dirty clothes. Kyven almost froze on the back of Strider as he looked at her, for she had a *sense* about her that was like a blinding light to his eyes, almost inciting him into spirit sight.

A Shaman! She was a Shaman!

His priorities immediately shifted. He couldn't leave her behind, but he also couldn't really take her with him. But despite that, for right now, taking her was what mattered the most. He'd figure out what to do with her after he got her. He rode up to the store, intentionally blocking her with Strider as she moved to come down the steps, and she looked up at him with open-mawed wonder for a long moment. No doubt she could sense *something* about him that was unusual.

"Are your masters the shopkeepers?" he asked.

"She don't talk none, mister," one of the kids supplied. "But yah, the storekeep owns her. Owns like five Arcans, he does. He sells 'em too, he's the village kennelmaster."

Kyven swung a leg over Strider and dropped to the ground, then grabbed her boldly by the wrist. "Good. Then he'll sell her to me," he said, going up the stairs and literally dragging the vixen behind him, who struggled to keep hold of her basket. The interior of the store was very small and somewhat spartanly stocked, with just a couple of shelves holding the simple goods and items that farmers needed; bolts of cloth, leather, hides, a few farm tools, and behind the counter there were four alchemical lamps sitting on high shelves, out of reach of the customers. A bell was standing on the counter, and Kyven picked it up and rang it forcefully. The Arcan wasn't struggling against his grip on her wrist, but he could tell that she was very tense and frightened. He wished he could calm her down or explain things to her, but this wasn't the time or the place. He did, however, drain the crystal in her collar on the spot.

An almost skeletally thin woman wearing a severe gray dress and her graying brown hair done up in a bun came out into the store from the door

behind the counter, who had to be the wife of the shopkeeper. She had a narrow, fox-like face, steely gray eyes, and an affronted expression as if she was better than everyone else in town put together. Her sneer vanished when she found herself facing not a villager, but a finely dressed stranger, and it was replaced by a predatory smile. “Good afternoon, good master!” she said in a surprisingly melodic voice for such a harsh-looking woman. “How can I serve you today?”

“I need a bag of flour, a bag of beans, a side of either beef or venison, I don’t care which, and *her*,” he said, pulling the Arcan forward and holding her wrist up.

“Well, I have everything you need, good master,” she said with an oily smile. “I don’t sell my house Arcans, so if you’d like to step around to the livery, I can show you a few Arcans I can sell you. I’d be willing to part with one of my laborer Arcans.”

“I want this one,” Kyven insisted.

“An Arcan is an Arcan, good master.”

“I want this one,” he repeated. “If you want to know why, send the kids out of the store.”

A couple of the kids behind him started whispering and giggling, and the woman suddenly became very stern-looking and disapproving. “She is not for sale,” the woman declare stiffly.

“Anything is for sale to a merchant,” Kyven said blandly. “I’m sure I have enough chits to overcome your sense of moral outrage.”

“I seriously doubt that. I won’t allow the perpetration of a perversity!”

Kyven dropped what to her looked to be a thousand chit coin on the counter, but was actually a twenty-five chit coin covered by an illusion. Her eyes bulged and she opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Then she swallowed. “H-However,” she said, swallowing again. “Given the, ah, current state of the Arcan market, them being so rare at the moment and all,

a-and the fact that you're somewhat intent on that particular Arcan, I might be inclined to part with her."

"Good. My Lupans like their meat young and tender," Kyven said in a chilling voice, picking up the chit and replacing it with the same coin, this time not covered by an illusion.

The woman's eyes bulged again, and she goggled at him. "Lupans?"

"What did you think I wanted her for?" Kyven asked flatly. "She's too young for you to miss her too much, there hasn't been any decent hunting for them this close to Rallan, and my Lupans like to play with their food."

The vixen started pulling against his grip, making strangled cries, but Kyven's grip on her was like steel. He didn't like scaring her, but he wanted this woman and this village to think that when the vixen left the village, she was going to her doom, just in case any of them even *suspected* she might be a Shaman.

"Well, in that case, if you put that first coin back on the counter, she's all yours," she said with a sadistic little smile.

"You'll take this one and be happy about it," Kyven stated bluntly. "I just wanted to see if your morals were worth a thousand chits. They are."

She gave him a hot, savage glare, then drew herself up stiffly. "The current Arcan market is rather tight," she said savagely. "She'll go for a thousand chits, your first offer."

"My first offer was to buy your morals. Now I'm going to buy an Arcan," Kyven retorted as the vixen continued to struggle against his grip. "Female Arcans are going for ninety in most city kennels right now. She's young, so she'd go for about one thirty to one fifty, but this one has obviously been mistreated, so that knocks her price way down. As thin and frail as she is, and since her pelt is obviously in bad condition, about the only thing she's worth is dog food. So, twenty-five is my offer."

"You can leave my shop," she said in a highly offended tone.

“Fine. I’ll just wander over to the tavern, have a drink, and tell everyone all about how you’re willing to whore out your female Arcans as long as you’re offered enough money.”

Kyven had identified her as the type that saw her status as nearly as important as money, and her reaction did not disappoint him from his initial assessment of her. She looked horrified for a moment, probably at even the indirect linking of her name with *whore*, and then she gave him a furious look filled with frustration and indignity. “Seventy-five,” she growled.

“Still the merchant,” Kyven chuckled humorlessly. “Fifty, and that’ll cover my other purchases as well. And that’s as high as I’ll go.”

She gave him a murderous look, then stuck her nose up. “Fifty and you get nothing but *her*.”

“Deal,” he said, which made the vixen all but writhe, making whimpering sounds.

“Let me get the key to her collar,” she said in a stiff tone.

“Why? The crystal’s been depleted in it,” Kyven said, pulling the collar off her and tossing it on the table. “Be glad I paid you fifty for what I could have simply grabbed off the street,” he added, fishing another twenty-five chit coin out and tossing it on the counter. “But I’m no thief. At least my morals aren’t for sale,” he said, which made her cheeks flush a hot red.

“Get out!” she snapped, pointing at the door.

“Gladly,” he said, turning and dragging the terrified Arcan behind him.

The kids followed him out of the store, dreadfully eager to see him feed the Arcan to his Lupans—if only they knew what Lupans were—but they were disappointed to see him advance over to his impossibly huge horse. “Down, Strider,” Kyven ordered, and the horse knelt down on his forelegs to let Kyven mount and drag the vixen up with him, grabbing very firm hold of her as she struggled against him. She found his arms to be like

steel, however, and couldn't even scratch and bite her way free of him as the Equar began trotting out of the village.

When most of the kids and a few adults were behind him, when he was far enough away from the village for them to be unable to make out what he was doing, he pulled her up to where her ears were close to his head. "I'm from the Masked," he said soothingly to her. "Do you know who they are?"

She continued to struggle against him, continuing to make terrified sounds.

"Calm down, I'm not going to feed you to my Lupans," he told her. "I just want them to think that. So calm down, calm down," he said in a soothing tone.

She didn't seem to believe him, for she gouged four deep furrows in his forearm with her short, sharp claws, which made him wince. He opened his eyes to the spirits and put his palm against her belly, then channeled a made-up spell on the spot into her that made her feel a curiously pleasant sensation. "I'm a Shaman, girl," he hissed into her ear. "I'm rescuing you, so stop clawing me!"

That caused her to stop struggling, at least mostly. She pulled at his arm a few more times, but the sensation she was feeling in her belly was decidedly not normal, not natural, and she twisted around enough to look at his face. She saw his glowing eyes, and she gasped.

"Shaman!" she said in a hushed whisper, then she sighed lustily. "You're the human Shaman we heard about," she said in a more relaxed tone, leaning her head against his neck and shoulder. He laughed reflexively when she licked his chin and cheek.

"So you *can* talk."

"She wouldn't let me talk outside the store, didn't think it was proper," she answered in a quavering voice, but she wasn't struggling anymore. "Did I hurt you?"

“I’ll live,” he answered. “I wanted them to think you’re going to be fed to my Lupans, and I couldn’t warn you about it. I’m sorry I scared you, but it was necessary.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain later, so until then, you’ll have to trust me, child,” he told her reassuringly.

“I trust you, Shaman.”

“Are you alright?”

“I’m alright,” she said.

“Do you have a name, little one?”

“Ember,” she answered.

“A pretty name for a pretty young lady,” he told her, ceasing his spell now that she was calmer.

“You think I’m pretty, Shaman?” she asked almost girlishly.

“Of course you are. I’m...partial to foxes. For reasons I’ll explain later,” he chuckled. “Where did you hear about me?”

“Rumors from travelers coming from Rallan,” she answered. “They say the Loremasters are hunting for a human Shaman that escaped from them. The humans can’t believe it, think it’s impossible.”

“It used to be, but not anymore,” he said calmly. “I’m the first human Shaman, but I don’t think I’ll be the only one. Now, little Ember, think you can move a little? It’s a little awkward holding you hanging halfway off the horse like this.”

With Kyven’s help, Ember sat in front of him a bit unsteadily in the saddle. She’d never ridden a horse before, and Strider’s broad back and the fact she was a passenger without stirrups would make her first attempt quite a bit more challenging than the usual first ride. Kyven kept an arm around

her middle, holding the emaciated Arcan steady, and had to deal with the bend of her tail prodding him in a couple of sensitive places as Strider trotted them towards Rallan. He didn't take her far, however, only about five minars before he found a little clearing near a stream that wandered close to the lane, a place that looked to be a popular place to stop and water horses from the chewed-up condition of the grass between the little creek and the road. Kyven helped Ember slide down, then he dismounted himself and let Strider wander over to the stream and start drinking. "First, to warn you, little one, I *do* have a pair of Lupans with me," he told her. "but I promise you, you're not their dinner. Like I said, that was just something I told that shrew of a woman so they'll think you won't live long after I took you from the village."

"Why?" she asked again.

"We're far enough away now," he noted. "Simply put, little one, you're a Shaman."

"What? *Me*?" she gasped.

He nodded. "Don't I seem different to you? Different from other people?"

"Yah, yah, you do," she admitted, looking at him, scratching at her matted fur. "I noticed something, well, something about you when you rode up to me."

"Shaman can sense each other, little one. That's how I knew who you were," he told her. "I wanted the humans in the village to think you were dead just in case you've ever used any kind of Shaman magic or done anything unusual that they might remember now that you're gone. Since they think you're dead, it won't matter."

"Oh. Ohhh, sneaky."

"I'm known for a certain amount of sneakiness," he said modestly. "Now, let's get something to drink and move on."

He rode through most of the afternoon with her in the saddle in front of him, as he explained, in very general terms, what a Shaman was and what they did. She seemed capable of accepting it, listening attentively and asking astute questions, proving that she was actually rather intelligent. He consulted the map again, holding it in front of both of them and looking over her shoulder down at it, and he realized she needed a bath...or at least his spell that cleansed fur. He saw from the map, and from the farms they were passing, that they were about two hours from Rallan. He wasn't ready to enter the city quite yet, so he detoured into a tract of woods and led Strider with Ember riding him until he found a void in the trees just big enough to serve as a camp that was bordered by a small stream dominated by a huge boulder that sat on the near bank, a boulder with leprous-looking growths of moss and lichen covering its side. Once he decided they would camp there, he dismissed his illusion of Van Steady, which made Ember gasp and stare at him wildly.

"Oh, sorry. I forgot to warn you about that, that that wasn't how I look," he told her. "My particular talent when it comes to Shaman magic is illusion, young one, and that's how I move around without being hunted down."

"That's amazing!"

"Thank you. Now hop down and let's think about dinner. And definitely a bath," he said, looking meaningfully at her.

She looked away guiltily.

The stream proved to be little more than a hand deep, so it was completely inadequate to serve to bathe the Arcan, so he resorted to Shaman magic. He channeled the spell he had invented into her fur, and it billowed out as if filled with wind, stripping all manner of dirt and detritus from her fur, dislodging quite a few fleas, some lice, and a few ticks, and she yelped when the spell brutishly untangled the mats in her fur, yanking on those knots before the magic unraveled them. After just a few seconds, however, the spell did its work, and it left her fur clean and smoothly

groomed, as well as stripping the smell out of it. “Better,” he said with an approving nod as she looked down at herself and saw that she was clean. “I don’t have many spare clothes, but I think I could find you something that’ll come close to fitting.”

“I’ve never worn clothes before,” she told him. “Do I have to?”

“Not if you don’t want to,” he shrugged. “How old are you, little one?”

“Four, I think,” she answered. “I lived my whole life there with the Master and Mistress. They sold my parents last year, but kept me,” she said with a lonely sigh.

“She didn’t seem very nice.”

“She wasn’t *that* bad,” Ember admitted. “She didn’t hurt me like some humans do in the village. She just didn’t care much about me. It was the Master I didn’t like. He would hit me whenever he argued with his wife, and he argued with her almost every day,” she sighed.

“She didn’t feed you either,” he noted, looking at her middle critically. Her ribs were very nearly sticking out and visible under her fur.

“I’m being punished for breaking her good dishes last week,” she said quietly, looking at the ground. “That’s how she punishes us. She won’t give us food.”

“I’d say you’ve been punished far too much from the look of you,” he grunted. “I have some jerky you can eat for now. After dark, I’ll go get you more meat than you can possibly eat,” he promised as he started unsaddling Strider, who was looking at the stream meaningfully.

Ember gnawed on the last of his dried meat as he set up camp, forgoing the tent and just laying out his bedroll and his extra blanket for Ember. Strider trampled down a young maple sapling and started tearing it apart with his jaws, Strider had a strange taste for maple saplings, and Kyven built a fire in the sandy bar next to the stream. Ember sat on her haunches next to the fire, staring at it in a bemused manner, but she started

and scrambled backwards fearfully as two shadowy shapes melted out of the forest on the far side of the stream.

“Easy, Ember,” he said calmly as the two Lupans padded out of the woods. One of them was carrying the carcass of a deer in its jaws, the Lupan so tall only the back legs of the deer dragged the ground. “Those are the Lupans I told you about.”

“They’re yours?”

“They’re not anybody’s anymore, they were being held on a ranch and they’re not really tame,” he answered as the dominant Lupan jumped the stream and boldly padded right up to the young vixen. “They’ve been following me for a while, and we’re sort of friendly with each other,” he added as the Lupan started sniffing at the Arcan, his nose bulling into her roughly. But when he knocked her down with a foreleg, Kyven stepped between them and stared right into his eyes, glowing Lupan eyes meeting glowing Shaman eyes. “Enough!” he commanded. “She’s mine, you leave her be!”

The Lupan gave him a challenging stare, then eased back. The Lupan sat down on his haunches and regarded the Arcan with curious eyes, then looked up at Kyven, then he stood up when the smaller female, dragging the deer, jumped the small stream and brought the kill into camp.

Ember looked frightened as she stayed on the ground, looking up at the Lupan and Kyven, uncertain and unsettled. “I told you, they’re not tame,” Kyven said. “But they’ll obey me and leave you alone now. Stand up, little one, and even though I know it’s not easy, don’t be afraid of them. They can smell fear, and if they know you’re afraid, they won’t be friendly to you.”

“Is that why it knocked me down?”

“Not exactly,” he hedged, not telling her that Arcans used to be their food until Clover freed them. “But if you show them you’re not afraid, they’ll respect you.”

Strider ambled over and bulled the smaller female over at the deer, and Ember flinched when the Equar casually crushed the deer's head in his jaws, then swallowed most of what he pulled away from it. "Wait here, little one," Kyven ordered as he advanced on the carcass. The Lupans and Strider wouldn't object to him taking his piece of the deer, but they might object to Ember. Using his knife, he cut away an entire rear leg, stripped the hide all the way down the hoof, then carried it back over to her. "Here, start with this," he told her, handing it down to her. She took it with a grateful look at him, slid over and plopped down on her backside, and started eating ravenously. Kyven returned to the deer as the two Lupans turned and bounded out of camp, melting back into the dark shadows of the later afternoon forest.

"Where are they going?" she asked.

"To get another deer, most likely," he answered. "They bring us meat because they know we don't always have time to hunt, and it's one way they show respect for us. Besides, they know Strider will brain them if they don't bring him meat, he's come to expect them to hunt for him and they know better than to disappoint him. You mean brute," Kyven chuckled, patting Strider fondly on the flank. Strider snorted into the kill, but didn't look up. "They let me share in the kill because they respect me. You, well, you'll have to prove yourself first. So until I say so, don't get involved with any meat the Lupans bring into camp unless I give it to you."

"Okay." She took another bite and swallowed almost without chewing. "Where are we going? What am I going to be doing, Shaman? You said something about me having to train."

"I need to figure out how to get you there," he grunted as he cut away the other hind leg and abandoned the rest of the kill to Strider, who would probably eat just about all of it. "I should really take you to Clover for now. You'd be much safer with them than with me. But I can't really turn around, and they can't really come to me. I'll have to think about it. Until I figure something out, you're stuck with me, I'm afraid."

“I don’t mind, Shaman,” she said between bites. “I know you’ll protect me. Mother said that’s what Shaman do. Protect those they think are worthy, and take them away from the collar and hide them where they can be free.”

“We protect more than the worthy, we try to protect everyone. But there’s so few of us, and so many to protect, and Loremasters hunt us continuously,” he sighed mournfully. “We do what we can, but even we admit that it’s not nearly enough. I’m sorry you had to be there, little one, and I’m sorry if you were mistreated.”

“It’s okay, Shaman,” she told him. “I understand, and they weren’t all that bad to me. Some Arcans in the village were much worse off than me.”

“Then you’re much wiser than most young ladies, young lady,” he said, giving her a slight smile.

She actually giggled. “What are you doing out here, Shaman?” she asked. “I don’t think you were looking for me.”

“No, you were a happy accident, little one,” he admitted. “What I’m doing is moving in front of an army fighting against the Loremasters, using my illusions to move through the human settlements and gather information the army needs. My next stop is Rallan, where I have the tough task of finding some way of preventing the Loreguard there from blocking the army from getting past Rallan on its way south. I’m still not entirely sure how I’m going to do it, but I’ll think of something.”

“All by yourself?”

“I’m well suited for these tasks, Ember,” he smiled. “If only because they can’t really catch me. If I somehow mess up, I can get away and try again. But now I have you, so I need to find some way to get you to safety...but I don’t really know how to do it outside of just taking you with me until I rejoin the army. I can’t stop what I’m doing just to take you to Clover.”

“Well, I can fetch and carry for you, Shaman,” she offered. “And I can stay with your horse while you’re off doing those Shaman things.”

He nodded. “You can at that,” he agreed. “But I might be able to have Clover come get you,” he mused. “You’ll be much safer with Clover than with me.”

“I’m just happy to be gone from the village,” she declared. “Happy to have a chance to be *free*.”

“I’ll do what I can to give you that chance, little one,” he promised.

Kyven considered the problem as he ate, then he watched with some amusement as Ember tried to tidy up the camp, a camp almost completely taken up by the Equar. He really had no idea what he was going to do. He couldn’t leave her behind, he couldn’t take her back to Clover, and he wasn’t sure if Clover could come to him. The fact that she was Shaman made her safety the utmost priority, so much so that Kyven wouldn’t entrust her to anyone but a Shaman or someone he explicitly trusted, like Lightfoot, Timble, Virren, or Shario. So, because he couldn’t leave her and couldn’t trust that she could make her way to the army on her own—not since she’d been a slave her entire young life and was utterly incapable of taking care of herself in the wild—he was in an awkward position. In all honestly, he was more or less stuck bringing her with him, making her stay with Strider and praying she could keep hidden while he was off doing his work. Actually, that wouldn’t be that hard, all he had to do was tell her to stay with Strider, since Strider was smart enough to not let himself get caught...or more to the point, nobody would be crazy enough to try to catch him.

One did not argue with a horse that weighed more than a bull, and was just as cantankerous when he was annoyed.

The Lupans returned at sunset with two more deer, and they ate on the far side of the stream before coming over to join them at the fire. Ember was decidedly nervous as the two pony-sized canines laid down near the fire flanking the human Shaman, and Kyven absently reached over and scratched them from time to time as he pondered the problem at hand. He

sat and stared into the fire for a long time, then leaned absently against the larger Lupan, the dominant of the two, who accepted his attention with stoic calm. “Ember,” he said in a calm, soothing voice. “Come here.”

The fox Arcan approached him somewhat warily from the opposite side of the fire. Both Lupans raised their heads and looked at her, but Kyven reached over and put his hand on top of the smaller female’s head even as he leaned against the male. “Sit down,” he said, patting the ground beside him and close to the female. She did so, visibly trying not to look scared even as her hands trembled, and she sidled up against his side as if seeking his protection from the two huge animals. “It’s alright, Ember,” he assured her. “Pet her,” he urged, motioning at the female.

“Do they have names?”

“None I’ve thought to give them,” he answered. “They’re not mine. They’re not even really tame. Remember that, Ember. These two are wild Lupans, but as long as you approach them using their own customs, they’ll treat you fairly. I’m not entirely sure why they’re following me, but they’ve seemed to attach themselves to me and Strider, so we’re something of a pack now. An odd pack, but a pack,” he chuckled softly.

Pack was something that Ember instinctively understood. She reached out and tentatively touched the smaller female Arcan, who was charcoal gray, and petted her uncertainly. But, when the Lupan didn’t object, she got more and more confident, stroked her thick fur with a stronger but still gentle hand. “Wow, their fur is, well, kinda wiry,” she noted. “Not soft, but not rough.”

“Rugged,” Kyven noted.

“Yeah, rugged.” She stroked the gray’s fur for long moments, then scratched her vigorously just behind the ear, which the female seemed to enjoy if her thumping hind leg and wagging tail was any indication. She roused from her bed and pushed against Ember, pawing and licking at her, which was what Kyven was waiting to see. “Now she’s talking to you,

Ember,” he told her. “She’s testing your strength. So let her lick you, but don’t let her push you to the ground. Hold your ground.”

Ember didn’t have much strength because she was malnourished, so she couldn’t stand up to the Lupan’s weight. The female pushed her to the ground, and Kyven watched very carefully for the sign that the female was about to get more aggressive. But, Ember continued to push at the Lupan even from the ground, obviously afraid but doing that Kyven told her to do, trying to push the Lupan off her enough to sit back up, at least until the female trapped her under her massive paws. Kyven poised himself to use Shaman magic to separate them, but the female just licked roughly at Ember’s face and chest, then gently clamped her jaws over Ember’s shoulder and neck. “She’s accepting you as a subordinate, Ember,” Kyven told her. “Lick her under her chin to tell her you accept your position in the pack.”

Ember did so tentatively, licking at the base of the female’s jaw, which caused the female to release her. Kyven silently sighed in relief for not having to intervene as the female let Ember back up, then laid back down beside her. “Sub-hor-dee-nat? What is that, Shaman? I don’t know that word.”

“It means you’re the low girl in the pecking order, little one,” he told her. “They accept you, but they are over you. So you do what they say.”

“But what if I don’t understand what they want me to do?” she asked fearfully.

“They’ll make sure you understand,” he said calmly, patting the male, who had watched the affair with impassive eyes. “To them, you’re just a little cub that needs to be trained. But the main thing to understand is they won’t eat you now.”

“*Eat me?*” she gasped.

Kyven nodded. “If you’re not pack, you’re food,” he surmised calmly. “You’ve been accepted into the pack, so they’ll leave you be. Just

remember that until you're strong enough to challenge them for a higher place, these two can tell you what to do."

"I think everyone can," she said, a bit ruefully as she looked over at the Equar, who had gone back to his maple sapling after eating his deer. "But that's okay. I'm used to being told what to do."

"For now," he said with a chuckle, reaching over and ruffling her auburn hair.

The talker in his belt beeped, and he picked it up and activated it. "Danvers?"

"Aye, Kyven. How goes it? Anything to report?"

"Nothing unusual, General," he answered as Ember gave him a curious look. "I'm just outside Rallan and will be going in probably after midnight. I want to have a little chat with the king while I can get at him when he's more or less alone. After sunrise, I'll survey the town and work out how I'm going to accomplish my mission." He glanced at Ember. "Oh, and I've picked up a little complication. Can you put Clover on for me?"

"Surely, give me a few minutes to get her," he answered. It didn't take him half that time, for Clover's voice came over the device not twenty seconds later.

"Yes, brother?"

"Sister, I have a little problem," he began. "I happened across a new Shaman just outside Rallan. I have her with me now."

"Really? That's wonderful news!" Clover said happily. "If you can hear me, welcome to you, my new sister! I look forward to meeting you!"

"Hello, Mistress Clover," Ember said tentatively in reply.

"We are naught but equals among ourselves, my sister," Clover laughed. "So just call me sister or Clover, if you please. Brother, what are you going to do with her?"

“I’m honestly at a loss here, Clover. I can’t leave her behind, I can’t bring her to you, I doubt she could make it to you by herself, and I don’t think you can come get her.”

“No, I doubt that. I think you may simply have to keep her with you until you reach Cheston, brother.”

“That’s what I’m thinking as well. If anything, she can stay with Strider and the Lupans. They should be able to protect her.”

“I would suggest getting a fake collar for her, brother, so any human that might happen across her believes she is owned.”

“That’s a given,” he agreed. “Until I can think of something, I’ll keep her with me.”

“Just be careful, my brother.”

“Naturally. I’m going to have to cut this short, sister. I have to get to Rallan.”

“Of course. Good luck, my brother. And farewell, my new sister. I can’t wait to meet you!”

“She sounds nice,” Ember noted as Kyven put the talker away.

“You won’t find anyone sweeter than Clover, little one,” he said simply as he unfolded Longtooth’s map and studied it. The king’s palace was literally in the center of town, and Rallan was a fairly large town, home to some fifty thousand people and Arcans. It was the center and heart of the tobacco trade in Carin as much as Riyan was the center in the Free Territories. Included in the map was a detailed floorplan of the palace, showing Kyven every door, every window, and every room. He would need that information, for he intended to infiltrate the palace by stealth and have a chat with the king while he was in his bed. According to the map, the Loreguard’s main barracks was on the west side of town, near the river than flowed just south of the city, which was his other problem. There was a force of some ten thousand Loreguard currently in Rallan, some housed at

the barracks and the rest bivouacked west of the city in tents, which was enough men to bottle up the army behind him and get them all killed. Kyven had to prevent that, and he admittedly wasn't sure how he was going to do that yet. He had a few ideas, but nothing solid.

"Is this writing, Shaman?" Ember asked, pointing at some of the titles.

"It is, little one," he answered. "I'm sure they'll teach you to read if you want."

"That sounds nice. The Mistress spent almost every night reading books while the Master was out at the taverns. Sometimes I felt sorry for her, the Master was very mean to her."

"She seemed to me to be the kind that brought it on herself," he said dismissively. "And I can't hold much sympathy for someone that came close to starving you, little one."

"It wasn't so bad," she told him. "I'd rather be hungry than having the Master hit me."

"Well, those days are over, Ember," he told her calmly. "You're a Shaman now."

"I don't know what that means I'm supposed to be."

"Yourself, little one," he told her as he folded the map. "A Shaman is first and foremost just that. Himself. Herself. You don't act like someone else, thinking that they're more of a Shaman than you, because they're not. Every Shaman is different, every Shaman has his or her own way of doing things, and none of us are either right or wrong about it. Being a Shaman will change how you see things and how you do things, but it won't change the fact that you're a Shaman."

"Okay," she nodded. "What's it like, being human?"

"You mean being a human Shaman?" he asked, and she nodded. "Well, I'm hated by my own people, but the Shaman accept me, and so do the Arcans. I hide who and what I am, but who I am lets me do things other

Shaman can't do. As to how I feel about it, well, as long as I'm where I'm needed and helping those who need me, then I'm happy. I'm not all that worried about how my people feel about me, because *I* know that what I'm doing is right, and I'm trying to help them just as much as I am the Arcans. As long as only one human accepts me, then I don't care about the others."

"Your wife?"

"You're sharp, Ember," he said with a smile. "No, not my wife. But she is a woman, and I do have feelings for her. As long as she accepts me, then I don't care about what the rest of humanity thinks."

"My Master and Mistress don't like each other, but I've seen other married humans. They seem happy where my Master and Mistress aren't. I wonder why they stay together."

"That's a subject I think only they can answer, little one. And I doubt either of them is brave enough to admit the answer, even to themselves. Humans can be very complicated."

"I've noticed," she said in a grave manner which made Kyven laugh.

Now, little one, I'm going to have to go. I need to go to Rallan and talk to the king, and then I'll come back. Now that I know the Lupans accept you, I feel comfortable leaving you with Strider. I want you to stay in camp and keep quiet. If there's any kind of trouble at all, stay with Strider. If he fights, stay out of the way. If he runs, stay with him. Don't follow the Lupans, stay with Strider. Understand?"

"I will, Shaman," she affirmed with a nod.

"If all goes well, I should be back before midnight," he told her as he stood up, leaving her between the two Lupans. "You two be nice to her," he told them. "I'll be back soon, alright?" Both Lupans looked up at him impassively, then put their heads back down almost in unison, more than content to laze by the small fire Kyven had built. "Strider, keep an eye on things," he called to the Equar, who was still gnawing on the maple sapling. The Equar snorted and bobbed his head, then went back to his sapling.

“What should I do, Shaman?”

“Anything you want, so long as you stay in camp, don’t annoy the Lupans, and don’t make much noise,” he answered. “Just keep your chin up, little one. I should be back in a few hours.”

Rather than surprise her with it and leave her wondering, and possibly noisy, until he came back, he advanced out into the woods and out of sight before stepping into the shadow world. He fought back the vertigo and the sense of *them*, taking notice of him, starting to move towards him, and padded from where he was into Rallan with but two steps, moving into the city and seeing parts of it waver into and out of existence as light in the real world shifted and moved. It was just past sunset, a time of dark, deep shadows, and Kyven could almost feel it in his bones, feel the shadow pulsing through him like blood. Despite the shifting nature of everything around him, he was able to discern where he was by matching streets with the map he’d read, and made his way to the palace. He moved into it through the shadow world, finding almost all of it visible to him since it was dark in the real world and the alchemical lights cast enough shadow inside the palace to “illuminate” the building in the shadow world. He stepped into an antechamber right off the royal bedchambers, one that was empty, then converged a gateway back into the real world and stepped through it even as he willed it to pass around him.

He found himself in a richly appointed sitting room with a large window, done in the Carin style. Windows in Carin were often large enough to serve as doors, and the two windows in this room opened to a balcony populated with sturdy wicker furniture. From the sounds coming through the door, the king was in his room, and was entertaining a young lady...if her moans were any indication. The young King Alak Longwell of Carin was unmarried, but since he was a king, he certainly was never lonely.

Unfortunately, he didn’t have the time to be polite and allow the king the time to finish playing with his bedmate. He opened his eyes to the spirits and looked through the door and wall separating the bedchamber from the parlor, and found the king and his playmate alone in the room.

There were two guards just outside the door of the next room, which looked like a study or office of some kind that led out to the hallway, serving as the only way into the royal apartments. If Kyven startled the king, those two guards could be in the room and brandishing their evil-looking alchemical rods, powered by black crystals, that would instantly slay whatever against which they were used. Kyven channeled a simple auditory illusion that created silence at the wall, which would prevent any yells from the bedchamber from reaching the guards.

Problem solved.

Kyven left his eyes open to the spirits as he opened the door and stepped into the royal bedchamber, where the young, surprisingly fit and muscular king was heavily involved with his blond-haired playmate, making the bed shake as he thrust powerfully. At this moment, Kyven could probably fire a musket in the room and not have either of them take notice, so he settled himself in a chair by a desk near the door, poured himself a glass of wine, and even put his feet up on the desk as he watched the performance impassively. It went on for a good five more minutes, until the king gave out a ragged groan, the woman all but screamed, and he collapsed heavily atop her. “Who’s your king, baby?” he asked in a hoarse, panting voice.

“Your big dick is,” she giggled in reply, but then she gasped in surprise when Kyven set down his wine glass and started clapping his hands, applauding their virtuoso performance.

“Encore,” he called cheekily.

King Alak Longwell moved far faster than Kyven would expect from a king, and in a way that surprised him. With blurring speed, he rolled off the girl, out of the bed, and onto his feet facing Kyven, and a pistol had come out of nowhere to be in his hand and pointed at Kyven. Kyven made no threatening moves, however, simply picking the wine glass back up and taking a sip, letting this young tawny-haired king have the opportunity to take stock of the invader, particularly his glowing eyes. Longwell was also

fairly handsome as men went, with strong cheeks, a straight, narrow nose, and pursed yet sensual lips crowning a square jaw. His hazel eyes were hard and calculating as he took in the man lounging about at his desk, but the pistol in his hand was rock solid as it stayed trained on him.

“You have two seconds to make your peace with the Father,” Longwell warned.

“Put your gun away, your Majesty,” Kyven said calmly as he took another sip. “Oh, and I think you might want to cover up, dear,” he said, glancing at the young girl, who was now naked and uncovered on the bed. “Not that you aren’t quite lovely, but I think you may not know me well enough to show me what you’re showing me now.”

She got over her fear enough to snatch up the covers and pull them up to her chin.

“You’re the human Shaman,” Longwell deduced.

Kyven nodded. “That’s right,” he affirmed. “I thought it might be a good idea to drop by and have a little talk with you, your Majesty.”

“And if I shoot you where you sit?”

“You’re far too savvy to do something so rash,” Kyven said mildly. “Clearly I’m here for a reason, and it costs you nothing to listen.”

“It would if they knew you were here.”

“Please,” he said with a smile. “Give me more credit than that, your Majesty. Nobody saw me come in, nobody will see me leave. Your two guards in the next room don’t even know I’m here, even if I started shouting. Why, you could shoot your pistol and they won’t even notice.”

“Magic!” the girl gasped.

“Yes, dear, magic,” he nodded, taking another sip. “It’s quite handy for someone like me.”

“What do you want?” the king asked.

“Not what I want as much as what I think you should know,” he answered as the monarch lowered his pistol a little, but not enough to prevent him from bringing it back up and shooting in the blink of an eye. “But, what I have to say might be something only you may want to hear. If you’d like, I’ll fix it so your lovely friend here can’t hear what we’re saying, and she can draw the curtains on the bed so she can’t see what we’re doing. That way she doesn’t have to worry about knowing something she shouldn’t know.” He nodded towards her as her cheeks paled. “It won’t hurt a bit, my dear. Just a simple little magic that fixes it so sound won’t reach you, the same spell I’m using to keep the guards outside from hearing us through the door. I wouldn’t even think of harming such a pretty young lady,” he said, which, despite the situation, made her preen just a tiny bit, and lower the covers enough to show him just a peek of the upper swells of her handsome breasts.

“I think that’s a good idea. Pull the curtains, Anna. I’ll open them when it’s alright.”

“Are you sure, Alak?”

“I’ll be fine,” he said, brandishing the pistol enough for her to take notice of it. “You go ahead and settle in.”

“I, alright,” she said. Holding the covers to her with one hand, she sat up and pulled the curtains on the poster bed, concealing her from sight. Kyven channeled the same auditory illusion over the bed, leaving the girl in silence.

“Now, on to business,” Kyven said. “I’m sure you know what’s going on?”

“With the Loremasters? More than they think I do,” he answered, lowering the pistol a little more. “They’ve marched an extra eight thousand men into my city to remind me of the power they have.”

“I’m sure you know more than that, your Majesty,” Kyven said calmly.

The man gave him a hard look. “I’ve heard some rumors.”

“Rumors often have a bit of truth in them.”

“Then there *is* an Arcan army?”

“There is. Two of them, actually,” Kyven noted, taking another sip of wine. “This is really good.”

“I’ll send you a bottle,” the monarch drawled dryly. “So, why is the human Shaman in my bedroom? To tease information out of me?”

“To give it to you, actually. I just wanted to see what you know so I know where to start.”

“Try from the beginning.”

“The beginning. Alright, first things first, then. There is an Arcan nation west of the mountains.”

The man gave him a hard look.

“I’ve been there, your Majesty. I’ve seen it. Trust me, it’s there.”

“I don’t believe it,” he said flatly. “Arcans are too stupid to form any kind of stable society.”

“You’ll find that opinion to be very wrong,” Kyven told him. “Yes, some Arcans aren’t intelligent, but the same can be said for humans. But, this isn’t really about the Arcans, it’s about the Loremasters. Do you know what they’re doing?”

“Publicly, they’re moving to explore the interior. Privately, I’ve heard they have intentions to settle Deep River.”

“Yes, they intend to take over Deep River, but their ultimate goal is to build a city of their own where the Deep River and Snake River join. Do you know why they’re doing it?”

“I’ve heard rumors,” he said. “But they’re too ridiculous for me to believe.”

“The one that says the crystals are running out?” When Longwell nodded, Kyven put down the wine glass. “That’s the truth,” he declared. “The crystals won’t last five more years, your Majesty. Not the way people are using them up now. Haven’t you seen the mining reports from your own villages? Fewer and fewer crystals are coming out of the Smoke Mountains.”

“That’s happened before,” he countered. “Just a coincidence where more than one village had its mines play out at the same time. As soon as they prospect around, they’ll find more, and the crystals are gonna be flowing again.”

“This time it’s different, your Majesty,” he said seriously.

“I don’t believe it.”

“The Loremasters do,” he said bluntly. “And I’m sure you’ll admit that they have access to far more information than you do.”

That made Longwell frown slightly. “How do you know that?” he challenged.

“Oh, please, I’m sure you heard the stories even down here. The Loremasters captured the black fox Shaman that was hiding in Avannar, I’m sure you heard all about how the Shaman set fire to the Loremaster’s building and killed a few of their higher ranking members.”

“Your underling?”

“Actually, that was me,” he admitted. “Magic, you understand,” he smiled. “Anyway, I was there to gather information about what the Loremasters knew and what they were up to. The Loremasters know the crystals are almost gone, and that’s why they’re marching an army into the Smoke Mountains as we speak. The Loremasters are going to try to take over every crystal-producing mine that’s left and get a stranglehold on crystal production, but they also believe that they can build an alchemical device that can create crystals, and they intend to build it far away from the kingdoms of Noraam so they can defend it from the rest of you and keep

absolute power in Noraam. And *that* is why there's an Arcan army marching to meet them. The Arcans absolutely cannot allow the Loremasters to get a foothold on their side of the mountains, your Majesty. Even if you don't believe that they're there, think about it simply as just another nation. As a nation that you'd say is technically at war with the Loremasters, look at me and tell me that if you were leading that theoretical kingdom, you wouldn't try to stop the Loremasters from invading your territory."

"Alright, theoretically speaking, I could see that."

"Thank you. So, what you need to know is that the Loremasters are breaking the alliance."

"That's what the Flaurens keep saying."

"The Flaurens have first hand knowledge of it. One of their spies got his hands on documents that prove it, to the point where the Flaurens are marching their army north. They should be in Georvan by now, on their way to Avannar." He picked up the glass again. "So, if you don't think this is serious, your Majesty, understand that the people north and south of you *do*. There's about to be open warfare in Noraam, because the Flaurens are moving to oppose the Loremasters.

"To summarize things, your Majesty, this is what's going on. The Loremasters have known the crystals are almost gone for years, and they've had plans to take over Noraam completely in more than just name using the crystal shortage as their impetus. Right now, I'll guarantee that Loreguard units are moving into your mining villages under some false pretense like protecting them from wild Arcans or some other bullshit, but the truth is they're there to take them over and keep *you* from getting any crystals the mines produce. There's also a large force of Loreguard on their way to Deep River to take it over, but their real goal is the Snake River, where they intend to build their own city, and ultimately try to build that alchemical device they think will create crystals, which will give the Loremasters complete and utter control over all crystals in Noraam, and therefore

complete and utter control over the entire continent. That's the ultimate goal, your Majesty. They've also amassed most of their forces in the Free Territories, because they know that when the kingdoms learn the truth, that's where they'll march their armies. The mines in the territories are the last mines producing crystals in any quantity, so that's territory the Loremasters want to defend at all costs. Between the Shaman and the Flaurens, that information was ferreted out, including all their plans about what they're going to do. When the Flauren spies got that information back to Flaur, they declared war. But what Noraam didn't know is that the Arcans are putting their hands into this as well. That's why I'm here, your Majesty. Consider me an envoy from the Arcans. I won't ask for your help or tell you what to do, but the Arcans felt that you, and all the other monarchs, deserve to know the full truth.

“The full truth, your Majesty, is that the Loremasters are betraying you, the Arcans are far more than you believe, and the crystals are almost gone. The Loremasters want Noraam to return to the glory of the ancients, and part and parcel of that is to reunify Noraam under a single banner, the way it was before the ancients were destroyed. And since this is all their idea, and they want to control the destiny of Noraam, they'll unify the continent under their *own* banner, not the banner of any of the kings of Noraam. After all, your Majesty, exactly why does a supposedly peaceful organization need such a big army? The dwindling crystals is just the excuse, the reason to move forward with that ultimate goal. There's a nation of Arcans west of the mountains, populated by all the Arcans that escaped from the collar on this side of the mountains, and they're moving to stop the Loremasters. You can believe me or not believe me, but in about two weeks, you will know beyond any shadow of a doubt that they exist, when the Arcan army meets the Loreguard moving towards Deep River and word gets back to this side of the mountains.

“What you need to know for the moment is that there's a second Arcan army in the Free Territories right now, moving south. They're going to pass through your territory, but you're not their target, your Majesty. They'll free

every slave Arcan they encounter as they move through your kingdom, but they won't attack you or your people unless your people try to fight them."

"An Arcan army? That's a contradiction in terms," he snorted.

"It's not *only* Arcans," Kyven told him. "There's a few thousand humans in it, men from the Masked and mercenaries and soldiers who have axes to grind with the Loremasters for their own personal reasons. Virtually all the Arcans in it are slaves they freed since attacking Riyan, but even a slave can be a good soldier if you give him a musket and teach him how to pull a trigger."

The king frowned slightly.

"That army is only going to get bigger as it moves through Carin," he continued. "Like I said, they'll free every slave they come across and fold them into the army, so you need to be ready for the outraged plantation owners who bang down your door over losing their slaves to the army. By the time they get where they're going, it might have upwards of thirty thousand men and Arcans in it. There's going to be war, King Longwell, and you need to consider just where you're going to stand in it. You can fight the Loremasters. You can do nothing and hope that you're overlooked, because Carin isn't very large. Or you can side with the Loremasters and ultimately lose your throne, and probably your head, when they take over, and decide you're too inconvenient to keep around."

"You assume I believe your wild story that there are no more crystals."

"I don't have to assume anything, because that fact is the only thing that makes everything else make sense," he answered simply. "Now that you know that secret, does everything you've heard about what's going on, both what I told you and what you already knew and you're just pretending not to know to see what I know, does it make sense now?"

Longwell practically scowled. "What does this army that's about to invade my kingdom intend to do?"

“Ultimately? Pass right through on their way to Flaur, then pass through again as they and the Flaurens march on Avannar. That’s why they’re moving south, and I’m sure you’re aware that the Flaurens are massing their armies to march north. They’re fighting for the same thing, after all.”

He was quiet a long moment. “The Loreguard is moving to cut them off,” he declared. “I’ve learned that much from General Huntsman, the garrison commander. The ten thousand men they have here is about to mobilize.”

“They’ll be in for a surprise,” Kyven told him easily. “But thank you for that. Finding out what the Loreguard here intend to do is one reason why I’m here. To talk to you is the other.”

“Are you really human?” he asked.

“Yep,” he said simply. “My particular skill when it comes to Shaman magic is illusions and deception, so I can appear as an Arcan when I want. I could walk out of here looking like your playmate, and it would be so convincing I’ll bet ten chits both your guards will have hard-ons after I walk by. It makes it much harder for them to track me, since they’re never sure just exactly what I look like,” he smiled.

“And that’s why they couldn’t pin you down in Avannar,” he breathed.

“Among other reasons,” he agreed. “Truth be told, I had a lot of help in Avannar from the Masked, other Shaman, and from the Flaurens. They very much wanted to get their hands on what I pulled out of that building, so they put an agent in our corner to help as much as he could.”

Kyven put the glass down and stood up. “Times are changing, your Majesty. I think the fact that I exist should be a fairly strong indicator of it. The Arcans and their spirits are not what everyone thinks they are, and neither are the Loremasters. And there is going to be a reckoning. The free Arcans have kept their secret to protect the Arcans on this side of the mountains, still in their collars and at the mercy of people who don’t really

have any. But, the Loremasters have forced them to show their hand and reveal themselves, because they can't repel the Loreguard army marching on Deep River without coming out of hiding. This is bigger than their secret, because it jeopardizes every free Arcan west of the mountains, as well as quite a few human settlers out there that know about the Arcans and live peacefully with them, or don't care about them. What you need to ask yourself, your Majesty, is which unknown you're willing to gamble on and trust. If you trust the Arcans and the Flaurens and side against the Loremasters, you might lose your crown if the Loremasters catch wind of what you're up to. But, if you side with the Loremasters, I can *guarantee* you that you will lose your kingdom, because the goal of the Loremasters is to return Noraam to the glory of the ancients, and in the ancient system all of Noraam was a single nation. There will be no room for kings in the Loremasters' system, Alak Longwell. You'll probably also lose your head, since the Loremasters would find your continued existence to be a trifle inconvenient when trying to consolidate their hold on Carin. How you decide to do what you do, I'll leave to you. I only came to give you all the details that I'm sure were missing from your intelligence, to explain the *why* of what's going on. I think you'll see things a bit clearer now, and since you'll see more clearly, it will let you make the wise choices for both yourself and your kingdom."

"Just answer one question," he said quickly. "If the crystals really are nearly gone, what will the Arcans do?"

Kyven looked him right in the eyes, and saw that that wasn't the real question he was asking. "We've built our entire society on the backs of slaves," he said simply. "I once believed that it was okay, because Arcans were just *Arcans*. Then I found out I was a Shaman, and the spirits the Arcans follow taught me, in a very direct and brutal way, just what kind of life Arcans have on this side of the mountains. The spirits used magic to make humans see me as an Arcan, and then I was put in a cage. The spirits the Arcans follow are very real, your Majesty, and while they may not be gods, they do have power, and they will make sure Noraam changes. I'm a symbol of that change. I am the first human Shaman, but I won't be the last.

So don't believe for a second that the spirits won't have a hand in what happens after this war. You can ignore and vilify the Arcan Shaman all you want, despite knowing that they aren't what the Loremasters claim them to be, but when there are more and more of *us*, you will not be able to deny the truth. The spirits also showed me the *true* Arcans, the side of the Arcans that humans don't get the opportunity to see, and though they are different from us, they're similar enough to us where it counts for me to see enslaving Arcans as the same as enslaving humans. Arcans are *people*, Alak Longwell, just as much as you or me. The Arcan that no doubt cleans your room after you get up in the morning is no different from the girl behind those curtains if you look past the fur and look into their hearts and minds. Eusica has already figured that out, since they don't permit slavery and as a result there are virtually no Arcans over there. I've had the rare and unique opportunity to live in both societies, your Majesty. I grew up human, and then I lived with the Arcans both as a slave and as a free Arcan, and I feel that I've been blessed to be able to walk a minar in an Arcan's collar, because it opened my eyes to the truth and steeled my determination to serve the Arcans any way I can to make their lives better.

“So, what will the Arcans do? Leave. Within twenty years, there will be no more Arcans in human lands, and humanity will have to learn how to fend for itself. They will leave us to our own devices, because after everything we've done to them, a thousand years of slavery and brutality, of killing them for their fur or for sport or making them fight each other to the death for our own amusement, they have absolutely no reason to trust us ever again. I've seen it too many times in the eyes of Arcans who escaped from the kingdoms, a look of fear and terror that you will *never* forget once you've seen it. And perhaps the Father feels that it's time for us to get our own hands dirty, to join the rest of the world, since the rest of the world doesn't permit slavery. Will it cause upheaval in Noraam? Certainly. It might even trigger a famine when farms no longer have slaves to do the work, at least if the kingdoms don't import food from Eusica. But in the end, we'll be better people for it. For the first time since the ancients, we'll have worked an honest day without forcing others to do our work for us, without being the very evil that the Trinity says we should oppose. And you

know what? Maybe that upheaval will be good for us. Maybe, after everything settles down and we're all used to the new way of things, things will be better. Maybe they won't. But the simple fact is, this is something that is inevitable. Evil can perpetrate itself for only so long before it destroys itself, and the days of the Arcan slaves are coming to an end.

"How you and Carin approach that fundamental truth is up to you, King Alak Longwell," he said with chilling calm. "You can embrace change, or you can go down kicking and screaming when change is forced upon you. How you deal with it will be the legacy you leave behind for anyone who remembers your name for the next thousand years. But if you don't move carefully and with wisdom, nobody will remember you at all." He gave the monarch a steady stare with his glowing eyes, even as he called up the shadows to slowly, inexorably, flow over him. He was making a show out of it, and he wanted the king to enjoy the performance. "So think carefully, Alak Longwell of Carin. Noraam is about to change forever. And now that you know the full truth, you can help shape the future, bring peace to the land, and if you're very careful, you may even keep your head."

For a moment, all the king could see was his eyes, the rest of him shrouded in shadow, and then those too vanished, leaving him to his own thoughts and ponderings.

When he got back to the camp about two hours before sunrise the next morning, he was met with a curious sight. Ember was still there and she was just fine. In fact, she was giggling and laughing, because she, the two Lupans, and Strider were all *playing*. It didn't look like it at first, and he almost moved to intervene, because the two Lupans were squared off against the Equar with Ember behind him, as if the Equar was protecting the girl. But then Ember literally darted under and between Strider's legs, reached out and tapped the smaller female Lupan on the snout, then scrambled back under Strider. The female moved to catch her, but Strider bumped her away with his snout. The male circled, but Strider didn't move his hooves, staying still because Ember was under him. Ember darted away

from the male, got behind the female, and grabbed hold of her tail. What ensued was a rather amusing game of chase-a-circle, as the female kept trying to circle on Ember, but the fox Arcan kept herself far enough out of reach to make the female turn several circles before she finally got smart and tripped Ember with her back leg, making the Arcan sprawl to the ground. Ember laughed loudly when the female pinned her down and licked her on the face. Strider and the male were having a mock-battle of their own, as the Lupan tried to move the Equar from his solid position, but being careful not to bite *too* hard or hurt the Equar. He roguishly nipped at Strider's legs, scampering away when the Equar tried to butt him with his head or swat him with his tail, then to Kyven's amazement, he jumped fully onto Strider's broad back and got a grip on his mane with his jaws. *That* made Strider move, and Kyven had to laugh as the Equar tried to buck his unwelcome rider. The male managed to hang on for a few seconds, but then he was dislodged and landed lightly on the ground. Strider brayed ominously and squared off against the wolf, whose tongue was lolled out as if in amusement, then he dashed in and tried to bite Strider on the right ankle, only to get a whole lot of Equar snout and forehead pushed into his shoulder for his trouble, knocking him away.

The fun and games were put on hold, however, when they all realized Kyven was there. The female let Ember up, and Kyven let her nuzzle at his neck when he came into camp. "I'm glad to see you all getting along," he noted, looking at the male, who still looked amused as Strider gave him flat looks. "Canines are sneaky, Strider, you have to watch them."

"It was a good night, it was quiet," Ember told him. "Did your work go well?"

"Good enough. I had a little chat with the king and looked over the Loreguard, then spent most of the night getting ready for what I have to do here." In that respect, Longwell had been truthful. After about two hours of investigation and chatting with a few Loreguard officers in a couple of taverns, he found that the Loreguard were indeed getting ready to move out, probably in the morning. One chatty Captain was kind enough to tell him that they were just waiting to know where to go, which told him that the

Loreguard chasing the army hadn't gotten close enough to warn the forces ahead of where to go to head them off.

And that was how he was going to misdirect them.

Kyven tracked down on General Walter Huntsman, commander of the Loreguard garrison in Rallan including the some eight thousand troops that had been sent to reinforce him, and prepared to take his place. Huntsman had given himself his last name, and it summed up his personality fairly well. He was a tall, burly man who thought himself a hunter, and was prone to brash statements that were nearly as forceful as his bushy moustache and thick sideburns. He had a lot of swagger, that was for sure, and Kyven spent nearly half the night playing cards with him and a couple of his officers, pretending to be a wandering gambler who the officers saw as some kind of sport to against which to gamble. The whole time, however, Kyven was studying Walter Huntsman carefully, from his mannerisms to his speaking style to even how he wore his uniform and carried himself. Huntsman was left-handed, so that was going to cause the right-handed Kyven maybe a little problems, but he could work around that. Huntsman's Phion accent wasn't hard for him to mimic. After he was fairly sure he could impersonate the general, Kyven memorized the details about the men and the situation that he'd need to know to fool the junior officers long enough to draw the army too far away for it to matter. He only had to draw them about a full day away, since the army couldn't be more than a day behind him, and they were going to pass by Rallan at least half a day to the east. If he could march the Loreguard out and maintain the ruse until they camped for the night, then he will have succeeded in his mission.

"I'm just here for a few minutes, little kit," he told her. "What I want you to do is settle the camp in. I'm going to hunt you enough meat to last you until I get back, because I don't have much time to get you settled, and I should be gone for two days."

"What are you going to do?"

“I’m going to pull the Loreguard army out of the way of our army coming this way,” he answered.

“All by yourself? How?”

He smiled. “My strength is illusion, deception, and trickery, little kit. I’m going to kill and replace the commander of the soldiers in Rallan, and then simply lead them in the opposite direction for a while. I’ll look and sound just like him, and since I spent most of my time away watching him and learning his little personal quirks, they’ll never know the difference. When I have them far enough away, I’ll sneak away and come back.”

She gave him a look, then laughed. “And you said canines were sneaky!” she teased.

“Canines aren’t the only sneaky ones,” he chuckled. “I just need to talk to Danvers or Clover to find out where the army is, then I’ll go hunt.”

“You can ask me.”

Kyven jumped in surprise, then laughed even as he turned. Standing at the edge of his small clearing, by the stream, stood Lightfoot, wearing nothing but her weapons belt, which was normal for her. She gave him a calm look, then advanced when he opened his arms to her and gave him a strong hug. “Only you could sneak up on me, Lightfoot,” he told her. “Did Clover send you?”

She nodded after nuzzling his neck, then she looked to the vixen. “Shaman, will you bless me?” she asked, which surprised Kyven. It was the first time he’d ever heard her ask.

“I, I don’t know how,” she said uncertainly as she accepted Lightfoot’s nuzzle of greeting.

“Just put your hand on her shoulder and ask the spirits to bless her, little kit. And get used to it,” he smiled.

“Oh. Okay, I guess,” she said, putting her hand on Lightfoot’s shoulder. “May, uh, the spirits bless you,” she intoned, trying to sound serious.

Lightfoot smiled and nuzzled Ember again, then let her go to turn back to Kyven. “You need to hide better.”

“You’re the only one who could find me,” he countered. “How far away is the army?”

“A day,” she answered. “Northeast. I ran all night to get here.”

“About where I figured they’d be,” he said, to which Lightfoot nodded. “Oh, Lightfoot, this is our new Shaman, Ember. Ember, this is Lightfoot. She’s a fighting Arcan, and a good friend. Just mind that getting more than five words out of her can be challenging,” he smiled.

“I’ll show you five words,” she countered, giving him a rude gesture.

“That was five, alright,” Kyven noted, then he laughed when she swatted him. “Are you taking her back?”

Lightfoot nodded. “I could find you fast.”

“You’ll need to be careful. Her owners didn’t feed her very well, and she’s a house Arcan.”

Lightfoot turned to Ember. “She does look scrawny.”

Ember seemed a bit offended at that word. “I can hold my own,” she flared.

Lightfoot gave her a cool look, and Kyven had to chuckle. “Welcome to a new level, little kit,” he told her. “Lightfoot can run a horse to death if it chases her, Ember. So can I, for that matter. Trust me, you won’t keep up with her.” He glanced at Strider. “Actually, there’s our solution right there. Ember can ride Strider back to the army. Strider can keep up, and it solves the only real problem I had. You can bring him back to me, because you can find me after I’m done leading the Loreguard in the wrong direction.”

“If I bring him back, I stay,” Lightfoot warned. “You need me.”

“I’d have said no yesterday, but I do run into problems when I have to leave Strider behind,” Kyven said thoughtfully, remembering how Strider

was left to fend for himself when he went to see Danna. “Strider will be just fine, nothing out here can really hurt him, I’m just worried about him wandering away.”

“Well, then I want to stay too!” Ember protested.

“No, you need to be with Clover,” Kyven told her. “I won’t risk a fledgling Shaman out here. You are far too precious, Ember.”

“You go, Shaman,” Lightfoot ordered. “You need to be safe. This is not safe enough.”

“It’s not because I don’t think you can hold your own, little kit,” he said sagely, seeing the impending indignant outburst. “It’s because to us, you are the most precious thing in Noraam, and you must be protected.”

“Just so,” Lightfoot agreed, looking at the young vixen sternly.

“You really think that?” she asked, looking at Lightfoot.

“Shaman are that important,” Lightfoot declared.

“We serve the Arcans as guides, healers, teachers, and as the messengers from the spirits, Ember, and we trained Shaman deal with the Arcans trying to protect us enough as it is. They don’t like to see us risk ourselves in any way, they believe we’re too important to put ourselves in danger. But when the Arcans find a Shaman like you, a Shaman who can’t protect herself, you’d be surprised to see what kind of protective reaction it incites. Just the fact that you’ll be in the army will make every Arcan in it fight like a crazed Wolveran, because they won’t let anything hurt you. Every Arcan in that army would die to protect you, and do it without hesitation.”

Ember seemed honestly surprised when Lightfoot nodded emphatically. “The Shaman serve us with their wisdom. We serve them by protecting them from harm. And since you’re a child Shaman, we will die to protect you.”

“And that’s the most you’ll hear Lightfoot say at once for a week,” Kyven said with a teasing smile.

“It’s why I’m coming back. *He* can’t fight,” she said, pointing at Kyven.

“Not like you, I can’t,” he admitted. “But I fight my battles a little differently than you do.”

“He cheats,” Lightfoot told Ember, who giggled.

“Rules? What rules? The only rule I follow is the one that says the guy who’s still alive when it’s over is the winner,” he retorted. “I don’t much care if my opponent thinks what I did was cheap or dirty, because he’s dead and I’m not.”

“Healthy,” Lightfoot said approvingly. “Listen and learn, Shaman,” she added to Ember.

“Since you’re here and taking them, I guess I don’t have to hunt,” Kyven said, glancing at the Lupans, who were giving Lightfoot an assessing look. Despite the fact that she was quite small, even the Lupans could sense the strength in the diminutive fighting Arcan, and they would respect her for it. “So I should get back. I know where my target is, and I have time to get to him before it matters. From what I found out, he’s going to receive his orders to move at sunrise, when he knows which way to go. I’m going to make sure that army goes the wrong way. So let me get back.”

“I’ll take care of things,” Lightfoot told him.

“I’ll move due south from Rallan after I’m done, so you can track me down.”

“Like you could hide,” she said teasingly.

“Yeah, yeah,” he retorted, which made Ember giggle. He nuzzled both of them in turn, then gave the Lupans a steady look. “I can’t tell you two what to do, but whatever you do, stay out of sight,” he told them. “And behave, Strider.”

Strider tossed his mane flippantly in reply.

“I’ll see you soon, Lightfoot. Be well, sister, and listen to Clover.”

“I will,” she promised.

Kyven turned and converged a gateway into the shadow world, which made Ember gasp in surprise. He smiled at them and stepped into it, fully confident that Ember would be just fine. If she didn’t have enough protection with the monsters, Lightfoot being there to provide direction made her unassailable.

General Huntsman seemed to his men to be in a surly mood.

This wasn’t uncommon to the men who were under his command, for he was a gruff, no-nonsense disciplinarian type of general, given to meting out harsh punishments but also just as quick to hand out commendations to those that performed well under him. The officers knew that they’d be marching in the morning once the central command told them which way to go to head off the rebellion, and Huntsman didn’t disappoint, barreling out of the command headquarters at daybreak and barking commands. Huntsman never told his men what their orders were until he gave them, and he never explained himself, of a mind that a common soldier didn’t need to know why he was doing what he was ordered to do, he just had to do it.

What they didn’t like, and didn’t entirely understand, was Huntsman’s seemingly obsessive drive. From the first moment the column of nine thousand men started to move, Huntsman forced them into double-time, and he ran them for nearly two hours behind his trotting horse before allowing them a break. The men weren’t used to *that* kind of exertion, so there was quite a bit of groaning and even some instances of men throwing up or collapsing after the column was halted for rest, a rest where Huntsman prowled the edge of the resting formation on his horse, trotting it back and forth as he waited impatiently for them to move again. One group of men

heard him in an exchange with one of his captains, which both braced them and worried them.

“We can’t go this fast all day, General,” the captain warned.

“We have to, Pip,” the general growled in reply. “I sure as hell don’t like running the men like this, but we have to get in front of the rebels. Intelligence has them nearly halfway to Harrom, a good twenty minars, and there’s nothing south of us big enough to stop them until you get to Lanna. It has to be right here, right now, and it has to be us. We have to get there and still have time to dig in and rest. I don’t want the men to get there and then have to fight while they’re still breathing heavy.”

“It won’t do much good if they’re collapsing before they get there, General.”

“I have faith in the men, Pip,” he replied calmly. “They won’t let me down.”

That exchange rolled through the army the way gossip can, and it bolstered the men quite a bit. There was considerably less groaning and more focus when they started up again at double-time, for they knew that they were the only thing standing between the rebel army and Lanna and all the plantations and farms and villages in between. That knowledge spurred them on...at least in heart. Bodies, on the other hand, weren’t quite so influenced by morale. By lunch, the army had been running since breakfast, and the men were fairly tired. Loreguard soldiers often marched at double-time, but none of them had ever ran for so long. There was quite of bit of silence as the men tried to eat, but weren’t able to eat very well, or very much, for they were already exhausted and it was barely noon.

When they started out again, thank the Trinity, they didn’t run. They did march at forced march speed, which was considerably faster than a normal march but not double-time. They marched for nearly an hour, rested briefly, and then ran at double-time for nearly half an hour. They repeated that cycle the rest of the afternoon, until they marched through a small village and into a stretch of neat, organized plantations of tobacco and

cotton. Just as the sun set, Huntsman finally called a halt and ordered the men to dig in along the north side of the road. Men who had run most of the day found themselves digging shallow trenches from which they could fire their muskets without exposing themselves to return fire. When one soldier dared to ask the patrolling general why they were digging in against Arcans, the general gave him a flat look. “The Arcans were freed by men, private, and those men have muskets. Now, if you wanna stand out in the open and get your ass shot off, that’s your decision. But I think the rest of the men would like a little something between them and those muskets, so dig.”

As the crickets started singing in the late summer night, the men had dug a trench just deep enough in which to kneel and fire over the embankment while minimizing their own exposure to return fire. Huntsman sent out scouts to search for the rebels, then retired to his small tent on the south side of the road, just abutting a fence separating the road from the cotton plantation beyond. Men, exhausted from the long, hard march and the excavation, ate a simple meal of beans and rolled up into their blankets without the usual chatting and lounging about the campfires common for an army on the march.

In the morning, however, things were chaotic and confusing. The last shift of guards went to wake up the officers, and to their shock, found them all dead. Every single officer and ranking sergeant was murdered, and alchemy was definitely involved, for the officers were frozen solid in their tent, as if they’d been out in a Hamp winter, where the sergeants had been almost surgically assassinated, throats slashed or necks broken...and whoever or whatever had done it had moved through the camp during the night and killed those men literally surrounded by others, and had not awoken a single man during the murders. The only officer to survive the slaughter was Huntsman himself, who stepped out of his tent when horns sounded to rouse the army, horns that took on a desperate sound. “General, the officers are dead!” the sentry blurted as he ran up to the grizzled officer.

“I know, private,” he answered in a shockingly calm, almost amused voice. “All of our alchemical communications devices are drained as well. The sergeants?”

“They’re dead too!” he said in a hysterical voice.

“Good. Guess I got them all.”

The private gave him a horrified look.

Huntsman smiled at him, a chilling, *evil* smile. “The Shaman thank you for making it so easy,” he said in a voice that *was not* Huntsman’s. “Now that everyone that could tell you what to do is dead, you’ll be easy to kill when the army arrives.”

The private gaped at him, absolutely stunned.

“Come now, think the Shaman weren’t going to do something about you?” he asked, and then the form of the burly, grizzled General Huntsman wavered and vanished, leaving behind a naked black Arcan with a white chest and stomach, but whose eyes glowed with a sinister emerald radiance. It took the private only a second to realized that standing before him was the black fox Arcan, the Shaman that had attacked Avannar! “Enjoy the upcoming battle without anyone to tell you what to do,” he said in a melodious voice just as the private’s training began to register to him. He reached for his pistol even as a strange dark shadowy *thing* appeared around the Shaman, and as the private fumbled with his pistol, the Shaman just *vanished* as the cloud of darkness enveloped him.

The private watched in muted awe as the cloud simply evaporated like fog, but there was no Shaman inside it. He was simply gone, as if he had never been...but what he had left behind was all the proof the man needed that he had most certainly been there.

Using his foul magic, the Shaman had killed every single man in the army that could tell them what to do, leaving behind a disorganized mob fearing an imminent attack from an army that wasn’t there.

The Rallan garrison of the Loreguard had been neutralized.

Instead of returning to Rallan or trying to find Lightfoot and the army, Kyven instead traveled to Deep River. He wanted to report in to Firetail himself, and he also wanted to see Danna and see how things were going there. Kyven could find Danna from within the shadow world, and just like the other times he had done so, traveling to her seemed to lure the *things* to him much faster than if he had simply walked a few minars. For a third time, Kyven escaped the shadow world just seconds before they found him, stepping out of a converged gateway enacted into the real world not from ambient natural shadow, but from his own power.

What greeted him made him frown. The army was camped, and they were within the Deep River valley, for the minar-wide river was just off to his right as the army prepared to move. Deep River itself wasn't in sight, but there was also a bend in the river in front of him.

"Shaman!" an Arcan called as they took notice of the black fox, whom they knew beyond any doubt was Kyven Steelhammer. Kyven was quickly surrounded by touching hands and warm smiles, and Kyven had to bless his way through the crowd until he met up with another Shaman, the vixen Dancer. She nuzzled him in greeting, then laughed as he returned to his human form and licked him on the cheek. "I liked you better the other way."

"You'd be surprised how often I hear that," he said blandly. "Where are Firetail and Danna, sister?"

"Come, not far, " she answered, taking his hand and pulling his away from the Arcans. "Later, my friends, later! Kyven has come far and no doubt has important news for Firetail!"

"Somewhat," he answered. "I got the Rallan garrison out of Danvers' way, and just wanted to let Firetail know," he informed her. "And find out what's going on around here."

"Well, then come with me," she smiled, taking his hand.

Firetail and Danna were with several Shaman near the river, consulting a map when he arrived. He was greeted warmly by the Shaman, but when

he turned to Danna, he could sense something nervous about her... something, well, *guilty*. That and the fact that she didn't seem to want to look him in the eye told him immediately that she was either having second thoughts about what they'd done, or she was unsettled about the situation with the army, or something. "What brings you here, my brother?" Firetail asked of him after he greeted them.

"I just finished with the Rallan garrison, Firetail," he answered. "I got them far out of Danvers' way. By the time they realize what I've done, they'll be too far away to even join the army chasing Danvers south."

Firetail laughed and patted him on the shoulder. "Well done, my young brother!" she praised. "How did you do it?"

"An old trick of mine, Firetail. I killed and replaced the general that led them, and used his identity to pull them far west of Rallan while our army goes east of it. Last night I killed the officers and drained all their communication devices, and I just left the army after revealing myself to the soldiers and basically telling them that the rebel army was going to attack them any minute. By the time they realize I was lying and someone takes enough initiative to take command of the army, it'll be too late for them to do anything."

They all nodded or congratulated him, and he staggered when Hardstep clapped him on the back. "I am constantly amazed at how much you do with so few options, brother."

"Why Hardstep, I'm a Shaman of guile and deceit," Kyven smiled. "You always have lots of options when you lie."

"It's the illusions, not the lies," Dancer smiled.

"Well, that too," he nodded. "Where are we here?"

"We're camped about a day southwest of Deep River," Coldfoot told him. "We're waiting for the humans to arrive. They're not here yet., but should get here early today. We let them settle in, then we surround them."

“So more or less on schedule,” he surmised.

“Have you eaten, brother?” Firetail asked.

“Not yet, but I’m alright,” he said, turning on Danna. “Danna.”

“Kyven,” she said, not looking him in the eye.

“Come walk with me.”

She sighed and nodded, then held out her black-furred hand to him.

He led her away from the other Shaman, and away from the army, taking her down to the river’s edge. She remained stonily silent the entire time, but she also didn’t take her hand out of his. Finally, as they reached a willowy oak that was growing by the riverbank, he turned and stopped her. “What’s wrong?” he asked softly.

She sighed and looked away, then looked to him, then she aggressively swished her tail back and forth. “I...I lied to you,” she finally declared.

He laughed, which made her give him a sudden hot look. “That’s it? From the way you were acting, I was afraid you’d done something relatively awful.”

“Well, I don’t feel all that good about it!” she snapped at him, then she blew out her breath and looked away.

“Don’t be silly, woman,” he told her. “I lie on a daily basis, though I never lie to you. I’m not—“

“That’s the point!” she declared. “We’ve always been honest with each other, Kyv! Always! And I’ve broken that, ruined it! I know you hate to lie, hate being her assassin, and I’ve always tried to—“ she broke off and looked away again, then turned completely from him, her back to him, and hugged herself with her arms. “I hate that you can read me like a book.”

“You can do even more to me,” he said simply. “You think I don’t know you can take in everything with a single glance? You’re not an investigator for nothing.” He stepped up and put his hands on her shoulders,

feeling the soft material of her cotton shirt under his fingers. “Now tell me what’s so wrong that you felt you had to lie to me, Danna.”

“*She is!*” she declared with sudden anger. “I told you I’d die before I was her brood sow, and I lied, Kyven! Lied! I—“ she glanced over her shoulder at him. “I wanted you so much,” she said in an emotional voice. “But that wasn’t *why* I slept with you.”

“What did she do?” he asked.

“She threatened to—“ she said, then her shiver cut her off. “She knew what you were going to do, Kyven, that you’d try to find some way around what she wants. She knew. She always knows! She threatened me if I didn’t try to get pregnant.”

“With what?”

She shivered. “She threatened to do to me what she did to Umbra, only *backwards*,” she announced. “Completely make me a monster! She can do it, Kyven! I know she can! If she can change me *halfway* into a monster, she can change me all the way! She said if I didn’t bed you the next time I saw you, she’d take *everything* from me, even my mind! That I’d be a dumb animal, but she’d leave just a little piece of me behind so I’d *know* what I used to be, and spend the rest of my life screaming and screaming and screaming inside! She looked at me, Kyven, she looked me in the eyes, and—and I know she’ll do it!”

She burst into tears, whirled, and buried her face in his shoulder and chest, clutching at his shirt with her clawed hands, literally drawing blood as her claws pierced his shirt and drove into his skin. For Danna, who rejected being an Arcan, Kyven could see that it was the perfect threat to level against her. The fox, as usual, had played her game to perfection, and terrified Danna into doing what she wanted her to do.

But this bit of intimidation against the woman he loved...this couldn’t go unanswered. Kyven had been trying to stay out from between Danna and his spirit because for one, he believed there wasn’t much he could do, and

for another he felt that things would smooth themselves out over time. But Danna wasn't going to knuckle under to her the way Kyven did, and now the shadow fox was using brutal tactics to blackmail Danna's cooperation out of her. Kyven had been willing to endure the abuse he received from his spirit, but it was an entirely different thing to see that same abuse leveled against someone else, someone for which he cared deeply.

He had to take a stand. But, since this was the shadow fox and she owned him body and soul, it meant that he had to play the game at her level. He had to play dirty to force the shadow fox to leave his Danna alone, because he couldn't stand to see her so distressed.

He had thought to bargain with his spirit to release Danna, but now he was going to try to *make* her release her.

It was time to fight back. And he knew *exactly* how to do it.

"Danna," he said softly. "Danna, it's alright," he told her, holding her close. "We'll do something about this, I promise."

"What can we do?" she sniffled against his chest. "She has us by the hair, Kyven! Both of us! If I don't do what she wants, she'll do something awful to me, and Firetail told me that she can kill you because she's your totem! I don't want to be a monster, Kyven, but I can't stand the idea of what she wants from me! And you...she's never going to let you go, Kyven. Never! I'll live my whole life watching her hurt you and hurt you and hurt you and you just endure it because you think it's the only way you can help, and it's going to destroy me!" She sobbed. "She's *evil*, Kyven, and she has us in her jaws!"

"She doesn't own me quite the way you think, my dear heart," he told her gently. "I may have to obey her commands, but she doesn't *control* me. I can fight back. It won't be blatant, but that's not how we do things, neither me nor her. I promise you, I'll take care of this. It may take a little time, and we both might lose a little skin over it, but I'll take care of it. And I'll take care of you, my Danna," he said, rocking her in his arms. "Always you."

She accepted his comfort in silence, just staying in his arms long after her sobs eased, feeling him hold her and taking strength from it. Finally, she coughed slightly, and gripped him a little. “What can we do?”

“Guile and deceit, my Danna. Guile and deceit. We’ll beat her at her own game. And the first move will be ours, but I need to know something first. Are you pregnant?”

“No, I had Firetail check and she says I’m not,” she answered. “Though I don’t know why. I thought that when she made me sleep with you, she’d, you know, make it happen.”

“She may be smart, but she’s not perfect, Danna. She makes mistakes, and it seems she made another one. But this is also the perfect way to start the game with our first move. Come, we have to go see Firetail.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m going to have her Seal us.”

“Seal? What is that?”

“Seals are ways to tie two people together. Clet and Stripes were Sealed so if one of them died, both of them died. But that’s not how what Firetail is going to do it.”

“What? Kyven, don’t be mysterious, you know I don’t understand Shaman magic all that well!”

“Firetail is going to Seal you so you can’t get pregnant.”

“Why? That doesn’t help us!”

“Oh, it does, Danna. It does.”

“How?”

“Because *I* am going to hold the Seal,” he answered with a grim chuckle. “So the only way you can get pregnant is if I release the Seal.”

“But that gets us nowhere!”

“Maybe not in the short term, Danna, but these games aren’t decided in the first move. I need the bargaining chip of having control over what *she* wants. That way, to get what she wants from *you*, she has to get it from *me*. And that means she won’t threaten you anymore, because it does her no good. She’ll have to level her threats against me, and I don’t scare easily anymore,” he said with a dark smile.

“She’s a spirit, she can just undo it!”

“Shaman magic doesn’t work that way, Danna,” he told her. “The only way she can break this particular spell is to have the Shaman that cast it undo it. But that won’t work, since Firetail will pass control over the Seal to *me*, which will make it as if I was the one that cast the spell. So she will have no choice but to come to me to remove the Seal. I will have something she wants, so she will have to *bargain* to get it.”

“*No!*” Danna gasped. “That’s what got both of us into his mess!”

“I’m a little wiser than the last time I tried to bargain with her, my Danna,” he said with a gentle, reassuring voice. “Trust me. The main thing for me, though, is to get her off your back. I don’t want her making you upset. I want you to be happy, or at least as happy as you can be in this mess.”

She gave him a shiny-eyed look, then licked him on the side of his mouth and cheek. “You’re the bravest man I’ve ever known, Kyven.”

“I’m all aflutter that I’ve finally made you notice me,” he said dryly, which made her laugh. “Now let’s go find Firetail. She has a little job to do.”

From the shadows of the oak, above them, the shadow fox watched them walk away, a smile playing on her vulpine features.

It was about time.

She was almost looking forward to seeing just how cunning her human really was, for now she had finally incited him into action, by threatening the one and only thing for which he truly cared, the one thing that would incite him into treading into territory which he feared, attempting to bargain with her.

His *Danna*.

She would enjoy the game against her own Shaman, but what was more important was goading him into accepting his full power. Until he would bargain with the spirits, bargain with her, he would forever deny himself a portion of his power and a healthy measure of versatility as a Shaman, for he was weak in power and would be forced to bargain with her in order to have her perform certain spells and magicks beyond his ability. If it took threatening his Danna and lying to her, so be it. That was her nature, and she would act no other way.

She would enjoy the game by not even cheating and seeing what he was up to.

Well, she wouldn't cheat *too* much. She wanted to be pleasantly surprised, but she also fully intended to win. And in this game, there really weren't any rules, just wits against wits, cunning against cunning. And part of her cunning, and her advantage, was being able to spy on her human Shaman without him sensing her.

After all, her other entertaining little game had reached its satisfying conclusion, for Toby Fisher now belonged to her. He led her a merry chase, but in reality he'd been much more acceptable of what she had planned. He bargained quite sharply against her for his services, far better than Danna or Kyven, but in the end, she got what she wanted.

Him. Body and soul, until she was so inclined to let him go.

She now had all the mortals she wished to have, and it was time to move forward with her plans. Her Shaman would entertain her with his skulking and shenanigans now that Toby had been defeated and claimed.

The waiting was all, and she was very patient.

Chapter 11

How does one outfox a fox?

Kyven pondered that question for quite a while after giving the *things* in the shadow world the slip yet again and returning to Rallan, then walking out in the dead of night due south along the road that led eventually to Lanna, as he promised Lightfoot he would. He had to beat his spirit at her own game, and it was a game she'd been playing long before he was even a glint in his father's eye. But he knew, almost instinctively, that there was no other way to free Danna from the clutches of his spirit. Threats didn't work, not when she had all the cards, so he had to do to her what she'd done to them, trick her, deceive her, manipulate her into getting what he wanted, which was Danna.

But the big question was *how*. How did one trick a trickster, deceive a deceiver?

He was certainly at a disadvantage here, and he knew it. For one, she'd been watching him most of his life, so she knew him very well. For another, she was a fucking *spirit*, for the Father's sake, possessed of a greater wisdom than him. But the biggest obstacle he had to overcome was the fact that this was *her* game. Deception, trickery, guile and deceit, it was her realm, her purview, her strengths, and to try to challenge her at her own game and beat her, well, it wasn't going to be easy. He honestly had no idea how he was going to do it. Having Firetail Seal Danna so she couldn't conceive and passing the Seal to him was a stopgap, a spur of the moment action designed more to make Danna feel better than what he pretended it was, just the first step in a plan. The truth was, he'd deceived her by not telling her the whole truth, something he had never done to Danna before; he had always been totally honest with her since they'd become friends. But this was a good kind of deception, as far as he was concerned, for it had

eased some of her anguish and gave her a little hope. She hadn't been quite so distraught when he left her, and that was what it was all about. Yes, it did do something for them in that it gave Kyven control over something his spirit wanted, but when he'd hinted that it was just part of a plan, well, that wasn't the entire truth.

Father, now he was lying to *Danna*. How low he'd sunk.

The late summer night was warm, muggy, and still, and it gave him time to think without much concern for what was around him, as he pondered the problem. The simple fact of the matter was, if he was going to do this, he had to be methodical, approach this problem the same way he approached tackling Avannar. So. The first question, then, was simple; what was the fox after? If he could identify her objective, he could move to impede the achievement of the objective, and use that as leverage in forcing her to give him what he wanted. So, what was it that the fox was after? What did she want from Kyven and Danna and Toby? And even broader than that, what did she want in what was going on?

He stopped dead in the road, a cold feeling through his soul.

War. She *wanted* war. It explained everything. It explained why she allowed him to be captured, to give the humans information that would send them rushing west with their armies because of their prejudice and bigotry against Arcans, and what was more, it explained *why she pulled him out of Avannar*. He could have almost single-handedly stopped the war if he'd stayed in Avannar by killing off the Circle, killing enough of the leaders of the Loremasters to cause them to abandon their plans. But she had not done that, she had actually pulled him out of where he could do the most good by sending him off on this, this, *busy work*. She wanted war, she wanted it enough to manipulate both the humans and the Arcans into a collision course. After all, it was what he was doing now, ensuring that a large army reached Cheston to threaten the Loremasters once the Flaurens joined with it and marched back to the north.

He remembered her coming to him at Haven after he learned the truth, and had told him that she believed that war was inevitable. He'd agreed with her, but now that he thought back to that conversation, he realized that even then, she was planning this. She was *planning* this war not as the ultimate and last-resort option, but she was planning it *actively*. Sending Kyven to Avannar, the information he gained, and the information the Loremasters gained from him, it was the catalyst that started them on this path because it mobilized the Arcans for war, and it warned the Loremasters that the Arcans were more than they believed. She had said to him that she saw war as inevitable then, but now, now he realized that she was *actively* working to incite this war.

Why? *Why*, for the Father's sake? Hundreds, thousands, maybe tens of thousands were going to die, on both sides. And they were risking all of Noraam joining together to attack Haven should the humans feel that the Arcan nation was too much of a threat, which could devastate Arcan society and possibly doom their race to an eternity of enslavement, or maybe even annihilation should the humans feel that without collars Arcans were too dangerous to allow to live. She was going out of her way to intentionally plunge Noraam into turmoil, and in that turmoil there was nothing but pain and heartache in their future, for both sides.

Was she so absolutely certain that there would be war, she intended to get in the first blow? Possible. But what was also important for him to remember was that she had no light inside her. The shadow fox was *evil*, and though she was a spirit and sought to protect the Arcans, her methods and her motives were not as noble or as kind as the other spirits. To her, slaughtering a few tens of thousands was an acceptable outcome so long as her objectives were attained. To her, the end justified the means, and the number of bodies left strewn lifeless on the field behind her meant nothing.

I seek not your affection, nor your approval. I require only your obedience.

It had chilled his soul the day she told him that, in a cold, merciless tone, and it was the perfect example of her personality. But, it also left him

all kinds of room. So long as he obeyed her, he was free to work against her in other ways. After all, what she had *not* said was something he could assume was perfectly fine for him to do.

Guile and deceit...even if it was self-deception.

So, his treacherous spirit wanted war. Why, he had no idea, but that was her objective, that was her goal. Now that he knew what she wanted, he knew how to attack her to force her to give him what *he* wanted, which was Danna. She would release Danna, restore her humanity, and leave her alone. In return, Kyven wouldn't undermine her plans.

That was a sobering thought. Was he willing to allow Noraam to descend into war just to get what he wanted? Was Danna worth the lives that would be lost when war came?

Well...that was basically a moot point now. Kyven couldn't stop this war now no matter what he did, even if he slaughtered every soul inside the Loremasters' headquarters that very morning.

So, in actuality, he couldn't threaten to take away her little war. So, he needed to figure out what about this war would benefit her so much that she was willing to kill tens of thousands and risk ruination across Noraam—

Kyven almost fell down, he came to such a sudden stop. Ruination. Of course. *That* was what she was doing. It...it was so clear to him now. Though her methods were vicious, almost barbaric, he could see through all the twists in her plotting and see right to the heart of the matter. And he had been wrong, very wrong. All this really *was* about the liberation of the Arcans from human control. The Shaman and Council wanted to *talk* about it. The fox was *doing something* about it, and she was kicking the human race in the face on her way out the door, punishment for nearly a thousand years of abuse and mistreatment of the Arcan race by humanity.

This war was just a step along her path, and that path led to the separation of the Arcans from the humans. And since they would have won that freedom through violent struggle, being forced to fight the humans,

then humanity would be forced to accept the result rather than delude themselves into believing that the Arcans had slipped through their fingers through deceit or trickery. And the Arcans, a slave race for a thousand years, would find a measure of confidence, and maybe not a little glory, in defeating their human oppressors and *winning* their freedom rather than being *given* it.

That was why she was going out of her way to engineer this war. She was forcing the Arcans to fight for their freedom, and through that struggle, impose their will on the territory west of the Smoking Mountains as well as establish themselves as slaves no longer, but as free beings. She was forcing them to grow up.

And what was more sobering...was he ready to help her? Was he going to be able to go to sleep at night knowing he had helped pull the strings that brought the chopping blade down on tens of thousands of humans and Arcans?

But...what was the alternative? To leave things as they were and try things the way the Shaman wanted, to try for peaceful change? Sure, in the short term, far fewer lives would be lost, but the Arcans would continue to be abused, misused, and slaughtered. Over time, the mountain of skulls piled under him for doing nothing would be far higher than the mound he was building for himself. And unlike the Council and the Shaman, he knew that nothing would change unless change was forced. That was a fundamental truth. The humans had no reason to want change, not when they had their slaves, they had their power, they had *everything*. The Loremasters were a perfect example of that, seeking even more, not content with what they had. They already had *indirect* control over Noraam, and now they wanted their empire. Sure, they'd call it a restoration, a *democracy*, but in reality it would be replacing twelve kings with one.

There would be no happy ending. Not in this.

The other side of what she was doing also needed inspection. She had a plan, and a long-reaching one. She went out of her way—in fact, she

expended a *tremendous* amount of time and effort—to create a new breed of Arcan, an Arcan with her monster’s shadow powers. Now, the question was, *why*. What did she want them for? She had to have some kind of a reason, some goal, for creating something completely new, even violating the natural order to do so in making Kyven Arcan and turning Umbra Arcan, and her intent to have Danna breed like some kind of farm animal. The fox wanted a race of shadow fox Arcans, who would have powers over and above other Arcans, and she had to have a plan. His spirit was nothing if not meticulous and prepared.

What use would a shadow fox Arcan be? Well, if the powers of his offspring were as strong as his, well, they would be effective spies and assassins. The only reason for them he could come up with was to keep the humans in check after the war, by sending shadow fox Arcans over into human lands to silently remove any human who had any bright ideas about attacking Arcan territory. Kyven could easily invade nearly any fortress or stronghold and murder a single man without ever being seen, and do it in such a way that nobody would ever know what happened. He could even do it without it appearing to be murder on its face, unless they used an alchemical device to discern the cause of death. There could be another reason, but if there was, he couldn’t see it.

But, the question inside the question was how could he use this information for his own ends, against his spirit? He knew what she was doing, and more importantly, *why*, so how could he threaten her enough to get what he wanted, without messing up what they were doing and putting the plan in jeopardy? It was a tricky proposition, and not something he’d come up with immediately. But, at least now he knew where he had to start, and what he needed to do.

He already knew part of that answer, and that was what he’d already done. He couldn’t really threaten her plans for war at the moment because he didn’t know how to put his hand in there without risking his mission, but in a way, he’d already started in having Firetail Seal Danna. That took Danna off the chessboard and put control of that piece in his hands, and that meant that the shadow fox would have to deal with him to get it back. That

meant that only Umbra remained to produce Arcan offspring, and since he was the only male, well...that meant he controlled *two* pieces on the board. Sure, Umbra was pregnant with three of his children now, but three did not a breeding pool make. The shadow fox knew that, and that was why she went after Danna. Toby too had some place in this plan, though he wasn't sure what she wanted from him quite yet...another breeding partner?

Possible. Actually, probable. The shadow fox admired Toby Fisher, admired him mightily, and she might see his qualities as perfect for her new race of Arcans. Toby was clever, insightful, motivated, and was also a nightmare of a whirlwind in a fight. If she was looking at him to be the second male Arcan to form the two branches of Arcans necessary to produce a viable breeding pool, she actually made a very good choice, much better than Kyven...and Kyven had the wisdom to admit that. Again, that, he could see, was why she wanted Danna as well, for Danna was intelligent and brave, and she wasn't a slouch in a fight either. Kyven, Umbra, Toby, and Danna, the progenitors of a new Arcan race.

But...only Umbra was a true Arcan. Kyven and Danna were only temporarily Arcan, and Toby would be as well if that was what the shadow fox was after concerning him.

Hmm...if that was the case, then his treacherous spirit was going to have to make a *second* Arcan out of a human. Maybe he was wrong in that. Maybe it was far easier for her to take a human and make him or her an Arcan than it was for her to take a monster and make it an Arcan. After all, she had to use someone's humanity to do it, and to get something like that, she had to bargain for it, she couldn't take it. And spirits were invisible to mundane mortals, they couldn't communicate with anyone but Shaman...or perhaps those who knew beyond any doubt that spirits existed.

People like Danna and Toby.

Alright, point. His spirit could make another Arcan out of a human, provided she bargained it out of her unwary prey.

Point. If she did so, then she could turn around and use that hapless person's humanity to create another Arcan like Umbra.

Point. His spirit couldn't just grab some random guy off the street and strip him of his humanity. She had to bargain for it, and to do that, she had to find a human with which she could interact...and that wasn't very common. The vast majority of humans couldn't see spirits...unless, of course, he was thinking far too narrowly. His spirit had in times past manifested visually, and had even once communicated aloud, though she usually conveyed her intentions through touch. Alright, so, maybe that meant that for a spirit to manifest into the real world like that, it took *tremendous* effort, and might be something that not all spirits could do. He'd bought that bullshit line from her about all spirits being equal back when he didn't have a clue, but he knew now that some spirits were stronger than others, and his totem was *fucking* powerful. She could do things other spirits couldn't do.

Correction. It was highly unlikely that his spirit had grabbed some poor random slob from a street in some city and tricked his humanity out of him. He was going to assume that his spirit couldn't just do that to *anyone*, and if she could, well, maybe she was very particular about who she took. Perhaps she couldn't do it an unlimited number of times, so she had to be careful in who she picked and how it was done.

So, he worked himself right back to where started; the number of shadow fox Arcans would be restricted until she formed breeding pairs, and at the moment, Kyven had control over both the male and female side of one of those breeding pairs. She could probably work around that roadblock, but it would take her time...and that was his true advantage.

That was the one thing she'd let slip. She was working from some schedule of hers that he couldn't see, but was there nonetheless. He knew it because she had went for the jugular against Danna, not even bothering to try to talk her or trick her into doing what she wanted. She had instead went right for the throat, trying to terrorize her into obeying. That was not how his spirit usually worked, not unless she was pressed for time, as she had

been preparing Kyven for his work during his Walk, when she admitted as much to him. After all, to be so *blatant* about her manipulations was... crude. Infantile. That was not how she did things. So, if she was being so savage about it, that meant that whatever plans she had for Danna were in jeopardy because of *time*. She wanted Danna pregnant by a certain time, and her threats against Danna were to ensure that she conceived according to his spirit's schedule. And now Kyven had gone and stuck a wedge in her clock's mainspring by taking control over Danna's ability to conceive.

Now, what other advantages did he have over his spirit? Not many. The only one he could really think of was that he understood how spirit sight worked, and since spirits operated under the same rules, then they had the same restrictions. They couldn't see what wasn't alive—

They could not see that which was not living or magical.

Now *that* might be useful later on.

He also had his shadow powers. She had the same powers, hers were stronger than his, and she knew how they worked far better than he did, but in one respect, they gave him one thing, and that was power over which she did not have direct control. She could deny him his Shaman magic, but she couldn't do *shit* about his shadow powers unless she took it to him at that level. She had given them to him when she made him human again, and Kyven knew that she could not take away that which she had given without a bargain.

In reality, she couldn't entirely deny him his Shaman magic either. He learned that little trick the hard way, and that was though she could say no if he beseeched her for the power to cast a spell, she couldn't passively stop him if he drew that power from a mana crystal and cast it *himself*. She'd have to actively stop him, use her spirit powers, which in actuality were just Shaman magic. Granted, it'd be easy for her to do it, *but*, she had to see it coming. If he could distract her or trick her, somehow, he could conceivably blindside her with magic if it came down to it.

Cunning bitch. He'd *believed* her when she said she stripped him of all his powers, when the twisted irony was that when he was in Ledwell's cage, he could have drained the crystal in his collar at any time. She had trapped him in that cage by convincing him he had no powers, using his unfamiliarity with Shaman magic against him. He hadn't known *how* to drain a crystal then, and besides, he was so convinced that he couldn't, he may not have even been able to do so even if he tried. The mind was a powerful thing, as capable of allowing someone to perform superhuman feats as it was capable of trapping a man in a prison of his own making. It all came down to perception and awareness, fundamental pillars of reality which his illusions attacked.

That was the truth of this, the only real truth. His spirit was a deceitful, manipulative, cunning *bitch*, and he had to be very, very careful in how he did this. He didn't have a doubt that if he pissed her off too severely, she'd kill him. After all, he was nothing but her possession, her *tool*, and she would only lament the waste of her time training him if she killed him. She didn't care about him, and his life hinged on his usefulness to her. Danna was right in that regard, when she said that she would have to watch his spirit hurt him, and hurt him, and hurt him. It wasn't that she took pleasure in hurting him, she simply *did not care* if she hurt him. That more than anything told him exactly what she was.

He was honestly surprised when he looked up and saw a faint slash of pink in the sky over a wide farm field filled with cotton, an unusual crop to see this far north. He'd been pondering almost all night! How far had he walked, lost in his reverie? It almost scared him to think that he'd gone so long without any realization of where he was and what he was doing. He stopped and looked around, then almost chuckled when he looked back down the road from where he came, and saw two familiar shadows lurking some dozens of rods back there.

"Alright, come on," he called, waving them forward.

The two Lupans, who had somehow found him during the night, padded up to him. The large male almost knocked him down brushing his

shoulder against his waist, and the female nuzzled his hand as he moved to stroke her wiry fur. His concern at not paying attention melted when he realized that these two would have made sure nothing attacked him while he was distracted, but it didn't change the fact that he had to be much more aware of things if he wanted to live to see spring. "I'm surprised you found me, I left no trail you could follow," he told them.

"They followed me."

Kyven honestly started then, for Lightfoot's voice seemed to come out of nowhere. He looked around, then opened his eyes to the spirits and quickly picked her out among the cotton plants, down on all fours and almost impossible to see. "Lightfoot!" he gasped, then he laughed. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to kill you about fifty times," she said reproachfully, standing up and jumping the fence separating the cotton from the road. As usual, the striped tabby wore only a belt holding two pistol holsters and sheaths for three alchemical rods, but she was also wearing a slender bronze collar which his spirit sight told him had no crystal in it, her little bit of deception to keep people from harassing or attacking her as they moved.

"Where's Strider?"

She pointed, and he looked back behind him. His spirit sight let him see the Equar well back from them, walking along at a pace that kept him a set distance. Kyven gave a low whistle, and the massive animal picked up into a shambling trot, catching up to them. "How did Ember take meeting Clover?"

"Awe."

"I figured," he said as the large male gave Lightfoot a cool look, but grudgingly got out of her way when she moved to join Kyven, surrendering his spot beside the Shaman. Kyven didn't miss that; the Lupans were afraid of Lightfoot. That only proved they were intelligent. "Any trouble getting here?"

She gave him a flat look.

“You know, this is why I hate traveling with you, Lightfoot,” he said blandly. “Talk, talk, talk, talk, I just can’t get you to shut up.”

She gave him a stare, then laughed suddenly, a sound he didn’t hear from her often.

“How far back are they?”

“Two days,” she answered, nudging her muzzle towards the northeast. “We need to go east. We need to be in front of them.”

“I figured,” he said, digging Longtooth’s map out of his belt pouch and unfolding it. “We can take these two roads here over to the Chain Road that runs from Charron to Cheston. I see Clover got you a fake collar, so we can just ride. I’ll keep my eyes open for the army, but from here out, it’s about getting the army there fast. It’s so big now, it can’t hide anymore.”

She nodded. “That’s what they want us to do,” she affirmed. “Rush to Cheston. Scout for the army.”

“Simple enough,” he said as Strider trotted up to them, and nearly knocked Kyven down as he nudged him with his broad muzzle. “I’m glad to see you too, you pain in the ass,” Kyven chuckled, reaching up and patting the Equar on the side of his nose. “Now, first things first. Belt,” he commanded, reaching his hand out to Lightfoot.

She frowned, but instead of removing her weapons belt, she instead started unhooking her pistol holsters and rod sheaths from it.

“It’d be easier to just take it off.”

“But I’d be naked,” she protested, which made him give her a strange look. “Don’t want you riding with a hard-on.”

He burst out laughing, no doubt waking someone up on the plantation they were about to pass.

Kyven was the only one that rode the Equar. Lightfoot preferred to stay on foot, bounding ahead on all fours to scout as the two Lupans slunk back behind him, which would cover his backtrail. It turned out that the Lupans didn't slink back there for long, for he glanced back after they'd just started out and saw that their ears were up and they were both looking off to the east. There was something out there that had their attention, and that made Kyven curious. The two Lupans bounded quickly into the forest, and Kyven didn't think much more of it, thinking they'd scented a deer, until he heard the squeal, and then shouts of protest.

He knew that voice!

Cursing, Kyven turned Strider around and galloped him back past the plantation they'd passed, looking towards the east. "Don't kill him!" he barked loud enough for the Lupans to hear as he reached where they entered the forest, slid down off Strider, and then rushed into the woods.

He found them just inside the treeline. The female had him pinned down with her paws and the male was pacing back and forth. Little Lucky looked terrified, and he wasn't even moving his tail as the female, which weighed a good three times more than he did, literally laid down atop him, giving him a cool look as she licked slowly at his face, as if tasting him.

"Lucky!" Kyven called in a harsh voice. "What the *fuck* do you think you're doing here?"

"I won't let her go out into danger alone," the calico said in a weak, wheezing voice as the weight of the Lupan inexorably squashed the air out of him.

Cursing again, Kyven looked down at him. He too was wearing a fake collar, from what he could see between the Lupan's massive paws. "Up," he commanded. The Lupan looked up at him, then moved her paws and stood up, but kept him firmly between her paws and under her, looming over him threateningly. Lucky was nude, wearing only the fake collar, and had nothing with him, not even a knife. "Now, before I let her eat you, boy, you'd better talk *very* fast."

Lucky gave the Lupan a single fearful look, then swallowed. “I won’t let her go alone,” he declared, more to himself than to Kyven. “I know she’s all trained and stuff, but I won’t let her go alone. She needs me.”

“She needs you out here like she needs mange,” he said with brutal honesty. “The only thing you can do for her is make her breakfast.”

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” he declared. “Shaman, please, don’t send me back! I, I have to be here if she needs me!”

Kyven sighed and put his palm over his face. The same reason he couldn’t send Ember to the army kept him from sending Lucky. He didn’t trust the boy to make it on his own, and now that Lightfoot was here, now the only one that could take him back was Lightfoot...and she might kill him for following her. This was no place for a half-trained *boy*. But, if he managed to keep up with Strider enough to get there before they left, well, at least that much Kyven could respect. Lucky was certainly intent on keeping close to Lightfoot, even if it meant risking both her wrath and the wrath of a Shaman.

But the wisdom of a Shaman took over before he said anything else. “I’ll leave it up to her. But boy, she may have the Lupans eat you for this.”

Lucky looked up at the Lupan, looking down at him and licking her chops, and he swallowed.

Lightfoot was certainly not one to fail to notice something unusual, for she bounded into the woods on all fours just seconds later. She padded up enough to see, then he heard her curse in a voice louder than anything he’d ever heard from her before as she rose up onto her feet and glared down at the calico Arcan youth. “What are you *doing* here!” she demanded in an angry voice, then Lucky yelped when she reached down, grabbed him by the fur of his chest, and physically dragged him off the ground. She hauled him up to her arm’s length, putting Lucky’s head above hers, and also demonstrated just how strong the diminutive cat Arcan really was.

Lucky gave her a fearful look, but his heart was also in his eyes. Kyven knew beyond any doubt that Lucky was utterly in love with Lightfoot in that moment, and he'd do *anything* to stay with her...even risk having her kill him for being stupid. "You may need another pair of eyes," he said in a quavering voice. "I can help."

Lightfoot gave him a truly *murderous* look, then let go of his fur. He gasped when he crashed to the ground, but then yelped in pain when she grabbed two handfuls of his chest fur and pushed him down into the ground. "Stupid infant!" she snapped at him. "This is no place for an untrained *child*!"

"I managed to follow you here," he said in a breathless voice, trying to sound brave. "I can keep up, I can help, I swear!" He gasped when she pulled him up off the ground, then slammed him back down, and she was not gentle about it. "I won't let you go into danger alone!" he wheezed, "and if you take me back to the army, I'll, I'll just follow you when you leave! I did it once, I can do it again!"

"Not if I break your legs," she hissed.

"It's your decision, Lightfoot," Kyven said simply, leaning against a tree and scratching the female Lupan absently behind the ear. "I'll leave it up to you if we send him back or let my friend here eat him."

Lightfoot glanced back at him, "Thanks," she said in a disgusted tone, telling Kyven far more than what Lucky had heard. Lightfoot truly fancied Lucky, and didn't like being put in the position where she had to send him away. She wanted Kyven to be the bad guy and force her to take him back to the army.

Kyven considered it a moment. If Lucky could get here, then he was pretty serious about it. And if he could get here without Lightfoot knowing she was being followed, well...that said something. He'd proven himself in that regard, that he could follow Lightfoot all the way from the army, keep up with Strider—mostly anyway—and manage to do it without the wary Lightfoot sensing she was being followed or being found by anyone else.

And, well, maybe he could be handy keeping camp while he and Lightfoot were out prowling. He considered it because right now, Lightfoot really didn't have time to take him back, not if she wanted to get back to him in time to matter. And, at least with a third person in camp, Kyven could shadow walk away and Lightfoot could patrol and still leave someone in camp to tend Strider.

She looked honestly torn, then let go of him in disgust and stood up over him. Then, to his surprise, she put her foot on his chest. "What am I going to do with you?" she asked, a little winsomely, a surprising sound coming out of Lightfoot. She looked to Kyven. "I can't take him back."

"I know, it's too far out of the way. I'll be moving, so you won't be able to easily catch up with me, and we don't have time to wait. So, should I let her eat him?"

"I'll think about it," she said, pushing down on Lucky with her foot, making him wheeze, then stepping back. "Stay out of trouble or I'll kill you myself," she declared, glaring at him, then she turned, dropped to all fours, and bounded back towards the road.

Lucky panted, putting his hand to his askew chest fur, then looked at Kyven. "I'll prove you need me, Shaman," he declared boldly. "I won't be a burden, and I'll prove she needs me."

Kyven had to chuckle as the slender little cat Arcan got back to his feet, his tail swishing nervously. "Go out to the horse," he commanded. "And get ready to run. If she runs, you run."

Lucky gave him one of his bright smiles, then rushed past the Lupan and the Shaman, heading for the road.

"And Lucky."

"Yes, Shaman?" he asked, turning to look at him.

"Don't *ever* call me that out here," he warned in a sober voice. "It will get us all killed."

A look of horror passed over him, and he nodded vigorously. “Okay, that was me being stupid,” he admitted. “I won’t do it again, Kyven.”

“Good boy,” Kyven answered, and Lucky vanished between the trees, heading out to a waiting Strider.

Kyven looked down at the female, who looked up at him impassively. “Well, this’ll make this trip interesting if nothing else,” he noted. “You two leave him be,” he told both her and the male, who stood quiet guard close to them. “He’s a friend. And thanks for nosing him out, it makes me feel very secure knowing you two are out there keeping an eye on things,” he told them, patting the female fondly on the back of her neck.

Kyven wasn’t entirely happy Lucky had followed him, but he couldn’t deny that the young male was absolutely serious about doing anything it took to stay with Lightfoot. As Kyven rode Strider towards the roads that would take them to the road that would ultimately get them to the Chain Road, he saw that Lucky was militantly silent, half-running half-bounding along beside Strider’s churning legs as the Equar cantered along at his ground-eating pace he could hold all day, and Lightfoot ghosted both in front and behind them. Lucky was going to prove himself, and the first thing he felt he needed to do, Kyven could see, was keep up with the Equar and make not a single sound. Granted, half of that was because they were in human lands and he wasn’t sure if he should talk to Kyven—pretending to be the Arcan slave—which was out of character for the young male. He wasn’t the kind to talk endlessly, but he did talk enough to take note of his silence.

The two Arcans certainly didn’t attract any attention from the farmers and plantation workers they passed. One human farmhand, standing at a fence rail watching Arcans toil in the tobacco fields, simply glanced at the trio as they traveled past, seeing it as not unusual at all to see two collared Arcans running along with a well-dressed middle-aged man with grizzled features and graying hair riding a horse. A bloody fucking *huge* horse, but still a horse. Lucky kept up with Strider all through the morning, but he was noticeably winded when they stopped for lunch, a lunch of venison jerky

and a rabbit that Lightfoot caught just before they stopped, which she didn't share with Lucky. She remained stonily silent during lunch, barely even looking at the young male, and she padded off as soon as she was done.

By sunset, Kyven was very, very tired. He'd been up for a very long time, almost two days, and he'd delayed camping to get to a place on Longtooth's maps that showed that there were no farms or plantations a comfortable distance around them. The reason, he found when he arrived, was that there was a strange sulfurous, smoky smell about the area, and faint wisps of smoke that carried that smell oozed out of the grassy ground along a very gentle ridge.

"The smoking glade," Lightfoot noted as they got there. "We can cross before sunset."

"The ground is hot," Lucky declared, shifting his hands on the ground.

"There's a fire underground," Kyven realized as he looked around. "Something under this hill is burning, and the smoke is seeping up out of the ground itself. I've seen a mine fire, what it does to the ground above it, and this looks just the same."

"Coal?" Lucky asked.

He shook his head. "The coal is in the mountains, not out here," he said, smelling the smoke and then making a face. "This is something else. Whatever it is, it surely doesn't smell healthy. Let's get through here and find a place to camp that doesn't smell like rotting eggs."

After about an hour, after the sun went down, they found a clearing in the woods far enough away from the smell that the air was clear. Lucky made sure he did all the work, setting out bedrolls for Kyven and Lightfoot, digging a firepit and lining it with stones, and collecting up enough firewood to last them a week. Lightfoot made sure to lounge on her bedroll, hands behind her head, glaring at him every time he looked in her general direction. When he left to go fill the waterskins, Kyven leaned over on his bedroll and nudged her. "Fraud," he teased.

She gave him an angry look, then it turned slightly guilty. “I don’t want him here.”

“He certainly wants to prove you wrong.”

“He’ll get hurt.”

“He faced that with the army too,” he noted. “At least here, you can keep him out of trouble. Oh, and you can keep staring at his dick when you think he isn’t looking.”

She gave him a sudden withering look, then her face fur ruffled.

“Busted,” he teased with a chuckle.

“Hush,” she said, cocking a threatening fist in his direction. “I can look without touching.”

“Still refusing him?”

“I won’t risk it,” she reaffirmed. Then she looked at him. “You’re here.”

He laughed. “You certainly know how to torment a man, Lightfoot.”

“His fault,” she shrugged. “What?” she asked when he stood up.

“I guess I’ve gotten spoiled,” he admitted with a chuckle. “I’m going to go hunt before I pass out from exhaustion. Keep everything under control.”

“Always,” she answered.

After shedding his clothes and enacting the power of the medallion around his neck, Kyven stalked off into the muggy darkness. He wanted this done fast, and that meant cheating. He found the signs that a herd of deer were nearby, tracked them to a small clearing between the forest and the fence of a plantation field, and he easily reverted to his old hunting tactics to down the largest of the animals. It felt strange yet also nostalgic to make the kill with his jaws, to taste the hot blood in his mouth as his bite

strangled the life out of the kicking buck, his claws penetrating the buck's hide as he held it down and still so its thrashing couldn't break his teeth. There was something...*thrilling* about making a kill as an Arcan, the anticipation as he tracked, the tingling thrill of the initial attack, the taste of blood, the joy of the kill...in some ways, he was still Arcan. He was a bit startled to hear more commotion out there in the direction the herd had fled when he attacked, and once he was sure his kill was dead, he saw the two Lupans padding into the clearing, each of them with a deer in their jaws. "Still following me," he chuckled as he licked away a thin spot of blood from his chops.

With three deer, there was more than enough for everyone. Kyven and the two cat Arcans ate from one carcass, the two Lupans shared one of theirs, and as usual, the Lupans surrendered a kill to Strider, who hogged his deer all to himself. After a filling meal, Kyven made no pretenses about his intent. "I don't care what you guys do, just let me sleep until dawn," he told them. "I'm exhausted."

"Sure thing, Kyven," Lucky told him, then he glanced at the two Lupans, who were moving from the bloody patch of ground that had once held their deer, which they had eaten, bones and all. "Uh," he sounded as the male sat down beside him, all but nose to nose with the young cat Arcan, staring at him with a cool expression.

"Here's your first test, boy," Kyven said with a yawn. "The Lupans are going to inspect you, see if you're worth their time. If you're still alive in the morning, you passed. Have fun," he said, then he deliberately laid down and covered his eyes with his hat.

So it was a bit of subterfuge, more or less intended to reinforce Lightfoot's need to punish Lucky for following her, what should they expect from a Shaman of guile and deceit. The Lupans wouldn't harm him because he asked them not to do so...but he didn't *know* that. He was sure the two of them would harass Lucky a little bit, but they wouldn't hurt him.

Either way, Lucky was in for an interesting night, between the Lupans and an angry Lightfoot.

Dawn in Deep River was a quiet, tense period for Danna and the army, for the Loreguard had arrived.

It surprised her when the scouts came back in the night and woke Danna up to tell her that the Loreguard was moving at *night*, at least until she heard why. They'd roused from their camp four hours before dawn and moved under torchlight, and they did so because the rear of their column had been attacked by an Ursorax that took issue with the large number of noisy humans that had invaded his territory. From what the scouts reported, the Ursorax killed nearly ten men around a campfire at the edge of the encampment, then was scared off by musket fire...if only for a moment. Scouts kept sighting the Ursorax prowling the encampment, and the squad the Loreguard commanders sent into the forest to kill the Ursorax were instead wiped out to the man by a pack of Lupans, their screams and the gunshots audible to the horrified army that heard them being wiped out.

The army, too jittery to rest and clearly in a bad location, then pulled camp and started marching by torches and alchemical lamps to get away from the Ursorax and Lupans, which their scientific advisors would tell them were territorial by nature. They were leaving the monsters' territory.

This was not a random occurrence. This was the human army learning the hard way what happened when a hostile force invaded territory claimed by the Shaman. The Shaman had saved this tactic for when the army was closer, letting them get far, far away from reinforcements or supplies, then they had, well, sort of talked to the spirits and asked them to rile up the local monster population. Danna didn't know they could do that, she thought they could just talk to monsters, like they had with the monsters that were with their army.

Just *thinking* about that fucking Wolveran they'd brought into the army almost made her pee herself.

There were other little surprises waiting for the Loreguard when they reached Deep River. One of the Shaman with them was particularly close to water spirits, and she was going to ask those spirits to stop all river traffic once the army crossed the river and took over Deep River. The spirits would then sink anything on the river that wasn't natural that came within twenty minars of the settlement, from a trading coster to a child's toy boat. They were also going to ask the spirits to make it unbearably hot inside the walls of Deep River, allowing the heat to drain the strength and spirit out of the invaders

Again, this was something that Danna know Shaman could do, since she'd never seen them do it before. But that didn't mean much, she'd come to learn. The Shaman were notoriously tight-lipped about their abilities.

It was all part of the plan. Danna had carefully planned this siege so that they could force the Loreguard army to surrender without firing a single shot. She didn't want to risk a single soldier, because they were going to need every single one of them to repel the next invasion, the *serious* one, when word of the defeat of the Loreguard expedition into uncharted territory got back to the Loremasters. When they found out what happened, they'd strip Noraam of every single able-bodied man and march them across the Smoke Mountains in a tidal wave of seething hatred. Even though Flaur was about to attack the Loremasters with help from a large Arcan army that Clover helped raise, Danna knew that the shockwave that would blast through Noraam when the humans found out that the Arcans had their own army was going to change everything. They would fear the idea of an Arcan army threatening the western frontier far, far more than they would a Flauren invasion from the south.

But that was worries for later, for right now, sitting on her horse in a small clearing on the top of a ridge overlooking the Deep River Valley, she watched a snaking line of human soldiers filing out of the forest, marching four abreast and with cavalry walking slowly behind them. They were on the far side of the river, and the ferry at Deep River was already crossing to go meet them, having been warned of the approaching army by a group of Loreguard scouts that the Shaman allowed to live to get there. Her army,

camped out about two minars west, would stay where it was for now, because what they needed to have happen was for the Loreguard army to occupy the town of Deep River. She wanted to see where they set up their camps, how many would be outside the town and how many would be in. She wanted to see if they tried to fortify the town, since they didn't plan on being here more than a week or so. According to the Shaman, they were to wait here for supplies that were coming downriver from Two River, supplies that were *supposed* to arrive within the next two days, but were in fact on their way to *her* army thanks to a strike force of fighting Arcans and five Shaman that had intercepted the four riverboats about sixty minars upriver, boarded them, killed their crews, and taken their supplies. Those supplies, she'd learned from Dancer, who had led the attack, were desperately needed by her army. The food and uniforms weren't all that necessary, but included in the shipment were nearly two thousand muskets, five hundred shockrods, a case of impact rods, ammunition, spare crystals, tents, and useful tools such as shovels, tents, blankets, and whatnot. Her army wasn't very well supplied as far as weapons went, even though cases and cases of muskets, pistols, and alchemical weapons arrived every day, literally being carried by Arcans who had ran all the way from Haven lugging those heavy loads. She had more and more supplies every day, but half her army still had no ranged weapon, was utilizing whatever they could find, be it wood axes, staves, and even simple rough wooden cudgels fashioned from tree branches or sapling roots.

That was the first warning to Tag that things were amiss, for he'd had no communications with the resupply party, and they'd had talkers...which were now in their hands rather than the Loreguard's. No doubt that Tag was already aware that his supply ships had gone silent, and was probably worrying about it, sending repeated messages back to the Loremasters and demanding to know what was going on. Because of that, Danna figured that Tag was going to be careful with his deployment around the town, even more careful than he'd need to be taking over a town filled with outlaws, prospectors, frontier settlers, mountain men, and other cantankerous individuals who wouldn't take kindly to the Loreguard marching into their town. There was a bit under ten thousand soldiers down there, their supply

wagons, about two hundred cavalry horses, and a contingent of about four hundred Arcans and around three hundred human laborers, men and Arcans who had been all but kidnapped from around Riyan and from farms and villages as they marched west. Those were the unlucky bastards who would be doing any heavy work that Tag wanted done, if he decided to fortify his position as he waited for his supplies and prepared to push west along the Deep River valley.

She almost felt sorry for them. Both them and the soldiers.

“And so it begins,” Firetail said sadly from the horse beside hers as they looked down into the valley.

“Fuckin’ amen, Firetail,” Danna agreed.

“What are your orders, General?” the Shaman behind her, a saucy little rodent of some kind named Quick, asked. Quick had fast hands, a sharp mind, and unfortunately, he also had a quick tongue and little care of where and how he used it.

“General,” she snorted, then laughed without much humor. “What we have planned, Quick. We let them cross the river and settle in, then I’ll go have a little chat with Tag.”

“You know him?”

She nodded. “I’ve met him several times, and I was under his command once, for about two days, during an exercise.”

“How long do you think it’ll take for them to get across the river?”

“Given there’s only one ferry, all day,” she answered. “Just keep our people out of sight and keep their scouts away, and we’ll be alright.

Danna’s prediction turned out to be true. Tag wisely wouldn’t leave his forces divided, and the poor ferryman spent all day running his barge back and forth as the nearly eleven thousand men and Arcans and all their supplies were ferried over to the west bank of the river, the poor man finishing his grueling work at nearly midnight as he brought over the last of

the human laborers. Danna watched nearly the entire process from their little clearing over the day, watching carefully as about half the army set up inside town, and the rest camped in the open area north of the town, in that clearing over which that cave Kyven said the human and his Arcan wife had lived stood. Men were put in the town, including the Arcan slaves, but the supply wagons were parked in the clearing with the other half of the army, both keeping them out where they could be easily accessed and keeping them away from potential thieves in town.

It began around noon, as General Taggan Wild prudently put out scouts after they had a chance to rest. Those scouts weren't searching for an enemy army, they were instead getting the lay of the land and concentrating on searching out their projected route west to look for anything that might hinder the movement of the army, due to their four small wagons and numerous pack horses. Due to the fact that they were crossing virgin territory, at least to them, thick forest with no roads, they couldn't use conventional supply wagons. However, they had brought four narrow wagons designed for travel over rough terrain that were loaded with foodstuffs and delicate items that wouldn't take being bounced around on the back of a pack horse all that well, and also to test the somewhat new wagon design to see how effective they were at cross country travel. The majority of the supplies the army intended to utilize were being sent downriver by boat after the army reached its destination, which was a plan that made sense to Danna. To load men on the limited number of riverboats would take away room for the supplies they'd need to build a permanent settlement far from civilization, but they'd need those men to both defend the settlement and also to push further west when they intended to go in search of the machine that originally created the Arcans. They'd already decided to send a force so large that the river cities like Nurys couldn't possibly attack and dislodge them, and to send that many, the best way to go about it was to march them there overland and then send the boats filled with the supplies their laborers and architects would need once they arrived.

The scouts had no expectation of trouble, and because of that, not a single one of them put up a fight. The professional fighting Arcans Danna

sent out to capture them did their duty with perfection, rounding up every single one of the 18 scouts Tag had dispatched to survey the area, blindfolding them, making them dizzy so they didn't know which direction the Arcans took them, then they were brought to the main Arcan encampment. There, the men stared white-faced at a *huge* army of Arcans as they were stripped naked, allowed to see what they'd be facing, and once they had their fill, they were blindfolded again and dumped about a minar from Deep River, on the edge of the land cleared by the farmers. They would then walk back to the occupied down naked and terrified, and would report what they saw to disbelieving officers...at least the first one or two would. As more and more scouts returned naked and with the same story, the officers would begin to believe them.

As Danna watched from her small clearing, the army down below went from lounging about in rest after the long march to digging hasty fortifications by sunset.

It was then that General Taggan Wild knew he was in trouble. He tried using his talkers to get information back to the Loremasters, but his talkers no longer worked. They could receive messages, but his messages couldn't get out. He then tried to dispatch riders to ride back to civilization with a warning, but the officer that set it up watched in horror when the ferry that had brought them all over was just *swallowed* by the river itself when 12 men on horses were trying to get back to the other side. The river simply rose up like a giant hand, slammed down on the ferry, and the 12 Loreguard and the ferryman were never seen again. He sent six more along the west bank with the idea to simply ride along the western bank all the way to Two River, but the men were massacred just at the northern edge of the clearing, shot down in clear view of the army, but nobody could see who attacked since the attackers were in the trees.

Tag understood then that he was in *serious* trouble. He had no reason to disbelieve the scouts, he now had evidence they had access to serious alchemical weaponry if they could use the river like that, and they had Deep River surrounded. He dispatched more scouts at sunset with the mission of reconnoitering the immediate area to search for enemy positions, but this

was not a smart thing to do. Had General Tag had more experience dealing with opponents that could see in the dark as well as a human could on a sunny day, or believed that the Arcans his scouts reported were the real army and not just cannon fodder for a human army that had somehow beaten them there, he'd never have sent his men out into that darkness. He learned the hard way that any kind of operation at night would end in disaster, and he learned it quickly when the agonized screams of his scouts echoed back across Deep River after the sun went down.

It was another long, sleepless night for the Expeditionary Force of the Loreguard, as they dug in and fortified Deep River with anything they could find. Buildings were literally torn down to form barricades as the general used the inner ring of buildings as a wall of sorts and filled the gaps with anything he could find, then brought his entire army inside. In a show of true compassion for the residents of Deep River, he confiscated their property and threw them out and left them to the mercy of the enemy army. Those people, afraid of what was out there but unable to go anywhere, ran into the forest or holed up in the caves north of town, but they weren't in the way for long. They were all rounded up by her fighting Arcans, disarmed, and escorted west to be allowed to settle temporarily at a camp the army had built for them near the grassy plain northwest of Deep River, well stocked with provisions and more than capable of seeing them through the winter if needs be.

The army had no quarrel with those men, and so they were treated with respect.

At dawn, and much over the strenuous objections of Firetail, Danna Pannen and Hardstep rode down out of the hills and into that northern clearing alone. Danna rode in as a human, but she was wearing the uniform of Haven, for they'd already contacted Kyven and asked him to take Danna's Arcan body for the entire day, from sunrise to sunset, so she had time to do this. Had she shown up as an Arcan, the men would probably capture her and stick her in the pen with the other Arcan slaves. Danna rode towards the hasty fortifications slowly, letting them see her coming, then

she stopped just outside the range of their muskets and had Hardstep wave a white flag.

Much to her surprise, about ten minutes later, General Taggan Wild himself rode out with five escorts and met her in the field.

He was still burly and healthy despite his short-cropped steely gray hair and moustaches, and Danna felt a tiny bit vulnerable as the six armed men cantered their horses up to her, where she had no weapons and had only the unmounted Hardstep for protection. But she was not a woman known for timidity. She kept her jaw raised and her eyes calm as they rode out to face her, about fifteen rods of empty space between them, and Tag initiated their parlay. “Well, I’ll be, we thought you were dead, Pannen,” he declared. “You’ve been missing for over a year.”

“I’m alive and well, General,” she answered. “And as you can see, I’m working for a new organization.”

“And what organization is that?”

“Come now, Tag, you read the reports. You heard the rumors. They’re true. The Arcans have their own nation out here in the frontier, and they can’t let you invade their territory and set up permanent settlements. You’re a threat to their security.”

“You’re working for them?” one of his officers sneered.

“I wasn’t willing at first, but they convinced me,” she answered coolly. “All they want is to be left alone. If they hadn’t proved that to me, I wouldn’t be here now.”

“So, what are you here for then?” another asked.

“I’m here to offer you a peaceful end to this, General, with your unconditional surrender,” she answered. “Send out your men in groups of ten, unarmed, and they’ll be allowed to return to Noraam.”

“And why would we do that, dear?” Tag asked, his eyes amused.

“Because I have you surrounded,” she answered bluntly. “Because I have over a hundred thousand soldiers in these hills around Deep River and over on the east bank, and you’re not getting a mouse in or out of Deep River that won’t be blown halfway to hell before he can take ten steps. Because I have control of the river north of here, and those forces have already captured the supply boats that you thought would be here waiting for you when you arrived, and they’ll make sure no reinforcements or supplies reach Deep River. And,” she said, taking a breath, “I because I have the Shaman behind me, Tag. Your talkers aren’t working right, you can hear messages but can’t send out any, can you? The Shaman are why. The river seemed to come alive and kill the outriders you tried to send back to Noraam to warn them, didn’t it? The Shaman are why. You have no idea what the Shaman can do, General. Hell, I didn’t believe it either until I saw it with my own eyes. Nature itself comes to heel when they call, and now you’re going to be on the receiving end of it. You may have muskets and shockrods, General, but I have *Shaman*, and they can make your life hell without coming within ten minars of you. I’ll let them demonstrate just what they can do and how helpless you are against them over the next few days.

“So, here are our terms, General. You surrender unconditionally. In return, your men will be allowed to return to civilization, with just enough supplies to make it back, and closely watched by Arcans who will keep the monsters away from them, but won’t help them. They’ll be walking and unarmed, but you have my guarantee they’ll make it back alive. Further, every man must take a binding oath sealed by magic that they can never come back into Arcan territory, so they can’t simply be rearmed and sent right back over to fight. You then tell the Loremasters that the land west of the Smoke Mountains is not theirs for the taking, and you make sure to tell them that the Arcans of Haven don’t want war, but they will not be quite this merciful the next time the Loremasters march an army into their territory.

“If you refuse, then understand this, Tag. Winter is coming. We’ll pin you inside your fortifications, and we will *starve you to death*. We have you

surrounded, we've cut your communications, and we have the river choked off. You won't get any supplies, you won't get any help, and I don't think you brought enough food to last your men the entire winter. So, you can either surrender with dignity, or we'll pin you behind your walls and watch you waste away to nothing. When we come into Deep River, General, we'll do it when what men you have that are still alive are eating the dead to survive and will be too tired to care to lift a musket when we walk down the street."

"And those are your terms?" he asked, his eyes no longer amused, as his officers seemed to comprehend what horror she intended to inflict on them if they didn't surrender.

"Those are the terms. I'm sure you won't take them right now, and I'll have to kill a few hundred of your men you send out to look for my weak spots. That's fine, I can accept that. I'm sure you can also accept that every time you test your cage, we'll have to punish you for it, and we'll do it in ways you won't expect. But when the time comes, Tag, when you're convinced I have you pinned in here, you know that no help is coming, and you do the math and realize how long your food will last, I hope you'll be a man before you'll be a General."

"You do realize that as soon as they lost contact with us, they'll send a relief column?"

"I'm sure they may want to, but right now the Loremasters are dealing with a major insurrection in Noraam. Remember that little raid on Riyan that caused you to march with half your manpower and no Arcan labor? Well, that's now an army of about ten thousand, and it's laying siege to Cheston. There's also an army marching north from Flaur intending to force the Loreguard out of the Free Territories, and they'll be joining into a single force in about four days. So, if the Loremasters do try to send you reinforcements, there won't be enough to break through my hundred thousand soldiers and bring you relief. Your talker still receives, so I'll let you simply listen in and learn that truth yourself."

She nodded to Hardstep, who turned and started walking away. “Tonight, it’s going to be very, very cold in Deep River,” she warned them. “And I’m not talking about just chilly. I’m talking the kind of bone-chilling cold you see once in a generation during a Hamm winter. We’re warning you it’s coming so you don’t lose men to frostbite or exposure, and also to prove to you that the Shaman can attack you without coming within ten minars of your slapdash walls. Experience what a Shaman can do tonight, General, then *seriously* consider our offer. The Arcans don’t want to slaughter your army, Tag. They just want you to go back to Noraam and never return. If you leave Deep River and don’t lose a single man, then both sides will consider that the best possible scenario.”

She turned her horse halfway, clearly intending to follow the massive Arcan back to the trees. “I don’t want this either. The last thing I ever wanted to do was to have to kill my own people, Tag, but I’ve seen the Arcan nation. I’ve seen the Arcans they bring, how scarred and abused and afraid they are. They need a place that is theirs, without humans, and I guess I decided that I’d rather uphold the Loreguard code and protect the defenseless in a place where it *means something*.”

“You’re a traitor to the uniform and to your race,” one of the officers sneered.

“Do you *know* what the Loremasters intend to do, Major?” she retorted. “Do you know why they’re sending you into the frontier to build a city?”

“To restore civilization to what was once civilized Noraam,” he answered.

“They intend to take over Noraam, depose the kings, and rule the entire continent in their stead,” she answered bluntly. “And they’re going to take advantage of the fact that the mana crystals are almost all gone to do it. That’s why they had you send detachments of soldiers to the mining villages. It had nothing to do with Arcan incursions or bandits, it’s so the Loremasters have control of the last regions still producing crystals. The

city you're building's purpose is so the Loremasters can build an alchemical device they believe will create new crystals, and keep it far away from the rest of Noraam so they have an absolute stranglehold on all crystal production on the continent, then use that to take over every kingdom from Hamm to Flaur. Flaur is marching on Avannar as we speak. They learned about it, and they're not going to let the Loremasters strangle them. And I'll bet my lacy panties that soldiers from Georvan, Alamar, and Carin are in that army by the time it reaches the Free Territories. The kings will fight back against the Loremasters, Major, and then you and the Loreguard will be fighting your own people on behalf of people who have broken their word and are trying to take over Noraam through treachery. That's half the reason I agreed to join the army of Haven, because at least here I know exactly what I'm fighting for and what it means to the Arcans I'm protecting. So long as the Loreguard fights at the behest of the Loremasters, then you are all breaking your oaths and betraying the very people you profess to serve.

"I know you don't believe a word I'm saying, but I want you to remember every word of it. Once you *do* learn the truth, I want you to think back to this moment and realize that I warned you. So, think about that while you wait for what the Shaman do to you next, your food supplies dwindle, and hope fades. Good luck, gentlemen. I sincerely hope you make it."

She turned her horse and started it back towards the trees, leaving her unprotected back open to them. But she knew that they wouldn't attack her; it was against the rules of war, and General Taggan Wild was too entrenched in the formalities to do such a thing.

That night, a cold unlike anything ever felt before settled over Deep River.

And *only* Deep River. The few trees inside the town literally exploded as the sap within expanded beyond the ability of the frozen wood to contain

it, bats in search of insects that wandered into town died almost instantly, hitting the ground nearly frozen solid, the ground became hard as steel, liquid water would freeze in the time it took for it to be poured from the height of a man's waist to the ground, and men huddled under blankets and around campfires that struggled to remain lit against the intense cold, and threatened to go out any time a frozen piece of wood was banked into them. And yet, ten rods past the hastily erected fortifications around the town, the frogs sang, the grass wavered from warm breezes, and nothing at all was amiss.

It was the object lesson to the humans, the demonstration that the Shaman could attack them in ways they could not stop, but what the humans didn't know was the massive toll it took on the three Shaman who had volunteered to do this service. The price demanded by the spirits to so violently go against nature was steep, and Danna doubted that any of them would be able to get out of bed for a month. All three looked as if they'd aged ten years during the night, and for an Arcan, that was significant. This was her bluff, this was her gamble. If the humans believed that the Shaman could do things like this every day, putting constant pressure on them, they might be compelled to surrender quickly. But if Tag didn't go for it, well, at least they'd had a taste of what the Arcan army could do.

She knew she wouldn't see any sign of whether or not it worked for maybe a week, because Tag wasn't going to give up without being convinced he was in a no-win situation.

The probing began about an hour after dawn, after Deep River's unnatural cold melted away with the rising sun. All their alchemical surveillance equipment either simply failed to work or revealed nothing but static or mist or hissing static from the earpieces, which meant that the Shaman were actively interfering with any attempts to gather intelligence via alchemy. That meant that General Taggan Wild, or just Tag to friends and his men, had to rely on good old fashioned manpower. Tag sent out twenty scouts, slipping them into the forest as best they could without

revealing what they were doing, but it became clear within minutes that the Arcans were ready for it. The screams of his scouts were audible in Deep River as they were eliminated, leaving him twenty men down and not a single scout returning with any information he could use. There was nothing wrong with his spyglass, however, and he used it to ascertain that there were no visible or obvious fortifications, walls, or barricades along the relatively flat valley bottom between the river and the valley hillsides, meaning that it might be possible to get an armed column out of the trap. He sent twenty men on stout cavalry horses southwest, in the direction least likely for any of his men to go, with orders to escape if possible and return to Noraam as quickly as they could to bring back reinforcements. But sometimes, fortifications were more than simple walls and trenches and artillery. The twenty riders got nearly a minar out from Deep River, riding through a field of wheat that was now untended, when they reached the end of their mission. A withering hail of musket fire erupted from the treeline and cut them down, most of them before they could even turn their horses towards the attack. In mere seconds, all twenty men were dead, as were all but four of their horses, and those animals laid on the ground bleating in pain and terror from mortal wounds. Tag, from his vantage point in town, looked through his spyglass and knew that it took *hundreds* of muskets to produce that kind of carnage. And what was more, the Pannen woman was keeping her forces in the trees, using the forest as natural cover as well as natural fortifications to both conceal the movements of her forces as well as provide them protective cover from any return fire. She hadn't erected any obvious fortifications, but it was clear that any force that tried to march through that clear area was going to be subjected to attack from the treeline high enough up on the hillside to make a charge at their positions dicey, and that was as good as a twenty rod tall wall built across the farmland. All they had to do was picket in a nice long line along the trees and they could kill nine out of ten men that tried to break out of this trap and escape.

Tag could admire the tactic were it not being used against him.

So naturally, he formed up an infantry unit of a thousand men and had them start shooting into the trees from the town's roofs, blind fire to pin

down any hidden attackers and maybe kill a few of them, and his army prepared for a probing attack into the forest behind the town from the river, along what looked to be a well-used trail that was so wide and well-worn that he could roll his wagons along it. He intended to attack those hillside positions from behind, send his men up onto the hillside and have them cut across and eliminate any enemy positions they found. The musketmen fired into the trees for a good ten minutes, at least until the retaliation came.

Fire.

Balls of fire lobbed in over the trees and crashed into the town. It wasn't magic, it was simple pitch set afire and launched, but it got Pannen's point across quickly. The men hastily became firefighters, beating out the flames before they burned down the entire town and robbed them of their only defensible position.

That happened three more times. Every time he assembled his infantry for a push into the forest, fire rained out of the sky to break them up and force them to put out the fires. Pannen was declaring that she could see everything he was doing, and she was going to break up any attempt he made to attack her. Either he committed his entire army to attacking an unknown position and abandoned his defensible position, or he did nothing.

A damned clever fucking sneaky thing to do, and he respected her for it.

The second probing action wasn't an attack, but a creation of his engineers and architects that had been with the army. Arcan slaves were pushed out to the river and put to work building a floating ramp of sorts, that would eventually traverse the minar-wide river and give the army a bridge to the east bank and give them a means to escape. The pontoon bridge, a clever design, extended nearly two hundred rods out into the river when Tag felt that it might just work, but then the river's natural flow seemed to shudder, and then a vortex appeared in the river not far from the end of the bridge. The Arcans screamed in terror and ran, but Tag saw even then that it was too late. A massive amorphous form exploded from the

surface of the water, and with one log-thick tendril, it smashed the pontoon bridge near the riverbank, severing the bridge from its land moorings and stranding nearly a hundred Arcans on what was now a disintegrating raft. Some jumped off and tried to swim, but most of them grabbed hold of the bridge as it started breaking apart and spinning downriver in the sudden current created by that...*thing*.

But the Arcans weren't pulled under with the bridge. The water *thing* herded the remnants of the bridge downriver and towards the opposite bank, even plucking the Arcans that had jumped and gently placing them back on the pieces, and he saw a mass of nearly a thousand Arcans wearing crude uniforms through his spyglass, coming out of the forest on the opposite bank. They met the water *thing* well outside of musket range, secured the remnants of the bridge, and started pulling the Arcans off of it. He could clearly see them removing the collars from the slaves and leading them into the forest.

In one day, he'd put nearly a thousand men in the infirmary with frostbite, lost about a hundred men, twenty horses, and over a hundred slaves. This was not a good day.

"Well...fuck," Tag growled. Clearly, Pannen had thought this out. He was hoping he was dealing with a poser, an average intelligence leading the ignorant and therefore appearing to be a genius among them, but Danna Pannen was smarter than he expected her to be. She had deliberately chosen Deep River as her trap, surveyed the area, worked out her enemy's escape routes and effectively blocked them, and had a clear tactical advantage with her forces holding the hills behind his position. Clearly, that...*thing* wasn't temporary, like the unnatural cold that had gripped the town last night. It had attacked and sank the ferry, and now it had attacked and destroyed the bridge over a day later. With that thing in the river, it made the river as good as a hundred rod tall wall, and the visible east bank of the river may as well be the coast of Briton for any good it would do them to reach it. "Any word on the town's talkers?"

“Nothing new so far, Tag,” his second in command, Colonel Trent, answered. “Every talker we’ve found so far is the same. They can receive, but no messages can get out. I never knew Shaman could do something like that.”

“I think we’ve badly underestimated the Shaman,” he admitted, chomping on the end of a moustache as he swept his spyglass across the forested hillside behind the town. “Then again, I’ve never heard of them being capable of anything like this. Even when they were using magic to save their own lives.”

“Maybe the ones we’ve dealt with in Noraam weren’t their best,” Trent considered.

“At this point, anything is possible,” he said, zooming in on what looked like a break in the trees near the top of the hill, and he saw Arcans. Nearly a hundred of them, tending two catapults. He studied what he could see for long moments, and saw that the defenders of those siege engines had no muskets. They were carrying farm tools.

So, Pannen, what muskets you have you probably stole from my supply boats, he thought, studying the Arcans carefully. *Your army may be big, but you’re limited by the number of musket balls you can shoot at me at once.* “Trent. I think we’re going to make a go of it.”

“With all due respect, sir, are you sure about that? Pannen seems to holding four swords and a crown in this hand.”

“I’m looking at a large number of Arcans guarding two catapults armed with pitchforks, hoes, and wood axes, Trent,” he answered. “She has numbers, but she doesn’t have equipment. And she hasn’t cut off *all* of my communications.”

“Are you sure the pigeons will find us?”

“If the talkers still receive, then the pigeons can home in on our beacon,” he answered. “We just have to get them back in the air with our message without losing them.”

“Pannen was Loreguard, Tag. She knows about the carrier pigeons.”

“True. But given how many pigeons there are, do you think she’ll see one land in town and guess that it’s one of ours?”

Trent was silent a moment, then chuckled. “I see your point. So we’re going to stall?”

“Stall isn’t a military term, Trent. Think of it as digging in for an extended defense of a strategic position.”

Trent laughed.

“She may have us in a barrel, but she’ll be the one getting her ass slapped if I can get a message to headquarters. They’ll send a relief force that’ll hit them from behind, and since they don’t have enough muskets to give to Arcans defending critical equipment, I’ll bet they won’t be able to stand up to an attack from a direction they’re not prepared to defend. And in the meantime, I’m going to keep testing her and gather as much intel as I can so our relief knows exactly what they’re up against. She doesn’t want to come in here, even though she knows she could burn us out.”

“That’s not very smart.”

“She’s saving her army,” he told his subordinate. “I know exactly what she’s doing. She only has so many muskets, and probably only a handful of alchemical weapons, and she knows that the next army that comes over the mountains will be fifty times bigger and ready to fight a war. She wants to force us to surrender without risking her own forces, saving them for the next phase. But mostly she wants to capture all our gear, which she can’t do if she tries to burn us out. So, she either risks soldiers she can’t afford to lose attacking us, or she risks losing equipment she needs later if she tries to burn us out. That actually gives us a little breathing room here, cause it stalemates her and gives us time to prepare. If she can get our gear, she’ll try to dig in and hold off an army that’s nearly as big as hers, but has much better equipment. We didn’t come prepared to fight a war on this kind of scale, Trent. All things given, we’re only lightly armed, more to deal with

stray Arcans and the occasional monster, not an enemy army. Hell, we only brought four cannons with us. But I'll guarantee you the army that comes in after us will have artillery, alchemical death machines, flitters for aerial reconnaissance, and enough firepower to blow her and her entire scummy Arcan fuckstick army to hell and back."

"That sounds reasonable."

"Trust me. That shit about them being merciful is just a frilly way of telling me that they don't have the manpower or the balls to try to come in after me. So, get the men settled down, Trent, turn this town into a fortress, get our supplies under hard cover so she can't destroy them, and work out a rationing system with the quartermasters to stretch our supplies as much as possible without starving the men."

"What kind of time window do you want us to work with?"

"A month," he answered, staring at the two catapults through his spyglass. "That's how long the food has to last."

"I think we can manage that," Trent said after a moment's contemplation. "Between what we have and what we confiscated from the villagers, we should be able to hold out that long without going hungry."

"Then get to work on it," he said. "Specifically, I want the town dismantled and cleared, and timber used to build solid fortifications and treated to resist fire. I don't want that cunt lobbing fireballs onto anything that'll burn us out."

"I'll take care of it."

"Good. I'm going to watch them watch us for a while and see where we can piss her off."

"Good luck with it, Tag," his junior officer said, then he scurried off.

You haven't won this game yet, Danna Pannen, Tag thought with an evil smile. And when I make you kneel down and surrender, I think I'll stuff my dick in your mouth and give you my terms while you suck my cock.

Cheston knew it was coming.

Kyven, Lightfoot, and Lucky stood on a ridge overlooking the independent seaport of Cheston as the rising sun painted the tiled roofs and buildings in a reddish glow, sun that warmed the scrabbled bark of the tall, sturdy, delightfully aromatic pine trees known as sea pines for which the region was famous. The sea pines grew in clusters surrounded by other trees, mainly southern hardwoods like maple, birch, oak, and a few live oaks here and there.

About a day behind them, Danvers' army was coming. It numbered over ten thousand now, closer to fifteen thousand, and it was moving with a speed that confounded the local Loreguard detachments that tried to catch them. Danvers had abandoned stealth for speed, and the humans of Noraam were starting to appreciate how fast an Arcan army could move. Arcans on foot could easily keep up with cantering horses, and that gave them a mobility that far outstripped the humans trying to catch them.

Cheston knew it was coming. The army of Cheston only numbered about three thousand men, reinforcing a Loreguard detachment that numbered about two thousand, but the entirety of the city was out there now, in a frenzy of activity as they built fortifications under the direction of the military men. The vast majority of those laborers, Kyven saw, were Arcans. They knew that the army was coming, and they were trying to prepare for it.

Kyven had a job to do here, but this time it was personal. Cheston. *Cheston*. The Ledwell plantation was just about an hour's travel southwest of the city, out of the path of the incoming army, but what was equally important was that the famous Pens, the most infamous Arcan fighting club in Noraam, was also south of the city, just outside its southern border. Kyven wasn't about to come here and not pay that bitch Annette Ledwell a little visit, and after he was done, he'd attack the Pens, free the Arcans, and use them to cause chaos in southern Cheston, letting them exact their pound

of flesh against the humans for everything the humans had done to them... within reason.

Kyven's official job was to observe the fortifications and tell Danvers where the weak points were, then try to disrupt Cheston's preparations to make it easier for the insurgent army to attack, but unofficially, Kyven intended to go off on Cheston, a place of which he had intensely personal and intensely painful memories. This was where he was changed into an Arcan, captured, sold, and then tortured by a sadistic son of a bitch. Nothing would make him happier than burning Cheston to the ground and watching the freed Arcans punish the bastards who lived there. But, those were the happy kitten dreams he enjoyed while half asleep. In reality, he couldn't perpetrate an atrocity here because the Flaurens would be here in four days, and they couldn't march up to find the road lined with the impaled corpses of the Chestoners rotting on splintered stakes and the entire city nothing but a smoking ruin.

He'd find a way to exact his vengeance while not making it look to the Flaurens like the Arcans were psychotic killers.

"Cheston. Cesspool," Lightfoot said in a grim kind of voice.

"Amen," Kyven agreed.

"Where?"

"It's about an hour southwest of town," he answered, which confused Lucky a little bit. Kyven had known Lightfoot enough to know what she meant when she asked those questions, but Lucky hadn't quite gotten the hang of it yet. "I think we'll drop by about lunchtime and I'll have a little *chat* with that bitch," he said with a dark expression.

"I'll help."

"You can round up the Arcans while I do my business with Annette Ledwell," he told her.

“Ohhh, okay,” Lucky piped in. Kyven was surprised he dared to speak. Lightfoot was still seriously pissed off at him, to the point where he walked very carefully around her. Lightfoot also proved that she could be a vindictive bitch as well, for she punished Lucky in many ways for following her. She made him do all the chores, she kept him from eating barely a mouthful with every meal since that first night, and she kept a cold glare on him any time she looked in his direction. In a bit of true bitchiness, she had been frisky last night, and not only did she partake of Kyven in full view of Lucky, which was normal in Arcan society, she *tortured* him with what she was doing, which was *not* normal. She made it abundantly clear that she was *fucking* Kyven, including one point where she was on top of him, her legs spread as wide as she could get them to go, and stared Lucky down as she deliberately mounted Kyven, showing him in blatant, graphic detail just what she was willing to do with *anyone but him*. Lucky sat transfixed watching Lightfoot lower herself down onto Kyven, and from what Lightfoot rather sadistically intimated to him earlier that morning, he looked humiliated, angry, contrite, and aroused all at the same time. Lucky was utterly smitten with Lightfoot, and her forcing him to watch her have sex would both arouse and frustrate him. Male Arcans, like male humans, were somewhat visually keyed and could be incited into sexual arousal through the right erotic imagery...and nothing would seem more erotic to Lucky than seeing the woman he wanted engaged in a sex act, even if it wasn't with him, letting him see her doing what *he* wanted to do with her, but couldn't.

Trinity, did Lightfoot know how to punish someone.

But, Kyven could admire Lucky's determination. He had been a model travel companion, enduring Lightfoot's wrath with stoic dignity as he tried to prove himself to her, prove that he would be no burden. He had made no complaints even when Lightfoot was being her bitchiest, and had done his work. Hell, even Strider and the Lupans seemed to like the boy. Strider liked playing with Lucky, which for him meant knocking the young man off his feet with his snout any time Lucky wasn't paying attention to him, and the Lupans took a liking to him as well...but that might be because two

nights ago, Lucky spent almost half the night grooming both the Lupans, which they seemed to enjoy.

The little punk had even *named* them. He'd started calling the female Sirra, which was Flauren for *charming* or *impressive* in a feminine sense, and the male he started calling Dauro, which meant *demon* or *monster* in Flauren, a nod to his huge size and intimidating appearance. What annoyed Kyven more than anything else was that the Lupans were *answering* to those names, and now Lightfoot was using them, too!

Kyven had no idea that Lucky could speak Flauren, but he could, he'd found out just that morning, having learned it from an Arcan that had spent enough time in Flaur to speak the language. Given that they were about to meet up with a Flauren army, having someone with him that could speak the language might be useful. That in and of itself made him suddenly thankful that the little twerp had followed Lightfoot.

The Lupans. They were behind him, and it seemed apparent that this time, they weren't going to run off into the forest. Much as he expected, the Lupans gave Lightfoot a wide berth. They could instinctively sense the danger the little Arcan posed, that she was a whole lot of deadly wrapped in a small package, and they had the sense not to think they were above her in the hierarchy. But, that really wasn't a problem, since Lightfoot saw the two Lupans as little more than oversized housedogs...dogs that could look her eye to eye. She seemed to get along with them, though she didn't pet them or show them any affection. To her, they were simply *there*, no more no less.

A commotion behind them caused Kyven to glance back, to see Lucky picking himself up off the ground after Strider knocked him down from behind. The Equar nickered evilly, almost like he was laughing, and knocked Lucky down again as he tried to get up, which earned him a playful swat on the muzzle from the beleaguered Arcan. That caused the Equar to prance about a bit in place, obviously amused, then bat Lucky in the chest with his muzzle without knocking him down until the young

Arcan patted him on the side of his head and scratched his ear. That... wasn't unexpected. Strider was a juvenile, and he liked to play.

"Where first?" Lightfoot asked.

"Cheston first," he replied. "Let's look around and get the information Danvers wants, call it back to him, then go take care of some business."

"Gladly."

To his surprise, the Lupans followed them all the way into Cheston, and Trinity, did they attract attention from the men and Arcans laboring to build fortifications outside the city. The two of them stalked after Strider with half snarls showing a little fang as they looked back and forth, intimidating all the people who gaped as they padded by. They all stopped what they were doing and watched the grizzle-haired older human on the impossibly large horse walk by with two Arcan slaves and two *huge* wolves trailing behind him, staring for long moments, then either returning to work on their own or being punished by human overseers for slacking. They reached what looked to be a small gate in a hastily built wall around the north side of town, that was still being built further south. The wall was being built out of charred logs, and it looked like a strong breeze would blow it over. They weren't even reinforcing it properly in their panic to get the wall built, which would make it a momentary inconvenience for a serious invading army.

"Who are you—holy *shit*!" the Cheston militiaman gasped, reaching for his shockrod when he saw the Lupans.

"They're mine," Kyven cut him off in a calm, gravely voice, the voice of Van Steady. "I'm Van Steady. I'm a rancher, or at least I used to be. I'm here looking for a safe haven, but from the looks of it, I need to just keep going south."

"Safe haven?"

"Don't you see what's going on out there, boy?" he asked flatly, turning in Strider's saddle and motioning the way they came. There's *war* in

the Free Territories. Didn't you know that?"

The man gasped. "No, we didn't hear about it!" he said breathlessly.

"The whole of the southern Free Territories is a big mess," he said in his grating illusory voice. "Some army just appeared out of nowhere and rampaged from Riyan all the way down into Carin. Caught the Loreguard with their pants down, beat the shit out of them in Riyan, then they started south. I think they're attacking Rallan as we speak but I ain't too sure, because I've been pushing my horse half to death trying to get as fucking far ahead of them as I could. The Loreguard has marched into the mining villages and barricaded them off like they expect them to be attacked any second, and citizens are fleeing the entire Free Territories like the Great Exodus come again, flooding Marand, Balton, and Phion with refugees. Trust me son, you don't want to go more than ten rods north out of this gate. It's a fucking mess back that way," he said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "I used to be a rancher, until the Loreguard confiscated half my herds for their war effort, then that *fucking* army stampeded the rest of them off a few days later. Now all I have is what you see, and I want to get as far from that insanity as I can and start over."

The guard gave him a long look. "Sir, I think you need to talk to our commander," he said. "I think he needs to hear about this."

"Surely, long as you let me come in, get something to eat, and resupply before I keep going south. From the looks of you folks here, I think I want to just keep on going."

"I don't think that'll be a problem, sir," he said, motioning to men atop the rickety wall, who then opened the small door.

They let them in, and Kyven and Lightfoot both spent long moments carefully assessing what they could see, and seeing that it was both slapdash and poorly planned. They'd built a wall around the outer edge of Cheston, but they hadn't thought to barricade the city streets, which would give an invading army complete access to the city once they got past the wall. They thought to put some cannons in a square about a block from the wall, but

the buildings in front of it would restrict their firing angles unless the gunners knew what they were doing and could fire at high trajectory without landing cannonballs inside their own walls. They couldn't really put the cannons on the walls, since the walls wouldn't hold them, and Cheston was actually the low point in the region, built in a shallow bay, so attackers would have the high ground. Cheston did have two sea forts flanking their harbor, however, and those tower cannons could probably fire in a thorough arc. They'd mobilized the citizenry to fight, and it was almost comical to see "Cheston gentlemen" trying to look professional as Loreguard and militia drilled them through the streets. What he did notice, though, were the large numbers of what looked like refugees, probably farmers and families from around Cheston who had fled here seeking shelter, and the Arcans. They were *everywhere*. The plantation owners had pulled all their slaves in with them, refusing to leave them out where they could lose them, and almost every street corner had gangs of Arcans, collared and chained together, sitting or standing and trying not to get ran over by wagons that bustled through the city.

Trinity, he loved it when they made it easy for him.

Two hours of roaming around and talking to men and ladies on street corners told him much. Many of the villagers and plantation owners and workers had abandoned their homes and fled to the city, seeking protection among numbers, mainly those to the north and west of the city. Those south of the city were more apt to barricade themselves into their villages and farms and try to hold out against any invaders, particularly the larger plantations that had plenty of men on hand to defend it. There were plenty of rumors that the Loreguard were rushing reinforcements from Lanna, which Kyven felt was probably true since it was now clear where the army was going. The people were, surprisingly, ready to fight. Even the townsmen were ready to fight, using anything they could find.

That, Kyven was sure Danvers wanted to know.

While he was talking, he and Lightfoot were observing their preparations. They'd built that rickety wall, and they had shifted their

defensive artillery primarily meant to repel a naval attack to deal with a land invasion, but hadn't done much inside the city to prepare for an invasion. No streets were blocked, no bunkers were built at strategic locations, the Loreguard barracks hadn't been fortified, and the mood of the soldiers, while honestly fearful of having to fight, nevertheless felt they were going to win. They felt this way because they were certain that the army about to attack them was made up almost entirely of slave Arcans, and these men didn't fear Arcans. They were more afraid of the human mercenaries said to be in the army. They felt that they'd sweep the Arcans out of the way without much of a fight, and then have to deal with the humans, against which the Loreguard Colonel in command of the Cheston forces could be stopped by a simple wall, since he knew that the approaching army had no heavy artillery, only men on horseback with muskets, and a wall could stop men on horseback with muskets. So, even though there were frightened villagers pouring into the city and a lot of panic in the streets, the soldiers believed that this was going to be an easy victory.

They were overconfident, and that was something Danvers could exploit.

After eating at a streetside inn, and having to pay ten times the value of the meal due to price gouging, Kyven led his motley band out the west gate of Cheston and rode towards the Ledwell plantation. Even though it was more than a year ago, he remembered the landscape, and he remembered the fear he felt when he and that coyote had ridden in that wagon cage. He grew quiet and pensive as they traveled the hour or so it took to get to those familiar rail fences, and he saw the fields of cotton over which he had stalked after they'd released him to the overseer.

There were Arcans still working the fields. Clearly, the Ledwells weren't fleeing to Cheston.

Kyven rode up towards the manor house with a dark scowl on his face, an expression Lightfoot didn't miss as she padded along beside the Equar. He frowned even more when they rode around the front of the house, into

the courtyard where he had been starved to death, and a chill ran through his soul as he looked around, seeing things he'd been forced to look at for days and days as his body wasted away. The buildings were the same, the roofed deck on the back of the house was the same, but the crude huts that had housed the Arcans, visible from where his cage had been, were gone. There was a new barn where they'd once stood.

"Good afternoon, Master," came a call, causing Kyven to turn back to the house. The coyote female he'd come with stood on the deck, wearing a modest gray dress with an apron over the front. "How may I help you?"

"So, they let you talk now," Kyven noted from the back of the Equar. "Where is Annette Ledwell? I have business with her."

The coyote looked a little surprised. "She's passed, Master," she answered. "Last winter."

Kyven was honestly startled to hear that. "What happened?" he blurted.

"Why, she was murdered by her own daughter," she answered in a conspiratorial kind of voice. "The daughter was sent to the Stocks, and Mistress Ledwell's cousin came to run the plantation for the little ones until they're old enough to take over."

That was a shock. The oldest daughter, she seemed nice when he was in the cage, but he remembered how hard she took Ledwell's death when Kyven killed him. She wanted him dead, revenge for the death of her father. Well, it seemed that the girl was more her father than her mother, and her revenge denied had driven her to murder her own mother, killing the woman who let the Arcan who killed her father get away.

"Is he a good man?" he asked.

She looked a little confused. "He's a fair man, Master. If you'd come in, I'll serve you some tea while we call him in from the fields to speak with you."

Kyven looked down to Lightfoot, who nodded. "I'd like that, little one," he said, sliding down off Strider. The coyote gasped when the two Lupans padded around the house and rejoined them, but said nothing when they came up to Strider and sat down. "Stay in the courtyard, and behave," Kyven ordered. "And don't kill anything," he added, looking to the Lupans.

"I, I can have a hand come care for your, um, horse, Master."

"Not a good idea," Kyven said, elbowing Lucky. "That's what this one is for. Strider might kill a hand he doesn't know."

Strider nickered ominously.

"Can I unsaddle him?" Lucky asked.

Kyven nodded. "We should be here a while, may as well give him a break."

The coyote had a name now. She was called Jewel, and she put them in the parlor as the older raccoon female brought him tea in silver cups. Where Jewel didn't notice a thing about him, the raccoon gave him a *long* look when she looked him in the eyes, and he could almost see her struggling to remember where she'd seen him before...or more to the point, where she'd seen those eyes before. With Lucky tending Strider outside, Kyven only had Lightfoot with him, who stood silently by his chair as the raccoon gave her slightly disapproving looks...no doubt because of her unclothed condition.

Kyven said little as he waited, he just watched and listened. Jewel was an attentive hostess, staying in the room, but she looked a bit uncomfortable under his penetrating stare. He could see that she was itching to speak, but for an Arcan to speak to a human unsolicited could get her flogged in Cheston.

That told him something.

He pondered the demise of Annette Ledwell until a young, handsome man strode into the room, wearing a pair of canvas breeches and a rugged denim shirt. He looked to be about thirty, with curly amber hair and

glittering blue eyes, and most women would find him devilishly handsome. He took one look at Kyven, then he smiled brightly. "Welcome, welcome!" he said, scurrying over and offering a hand that had clearly just been washed. "I'm Tyler May, sir, Annette's cousin. Pardon the delay, sir, I was out working on our cotton gin. It's going to be needed in a few days, and it's a cantankerous old brute that likes to break right when we need it most."

"Not a problem," Kyven said, taking his hand. "I'm Van Steady. I'm a rancher, or at least I used to be."

"Bone said you had business with my cousin?"

"Not anymore," he said. "I came here to settle a matter of unfinished business of a personal nature, but with her dead, the matter is closed."

"That sounds, well, serious."

"It wasn't going to be pleasant," he said with a simple nod.

"Let me guess. Arthur?"

Kyven simply nodded.

"I figured," he sighed. "That man was more trouble for my cousin than he was worth. And he always seemed so, so, *civilized*. But after he died, the debts started rolling in. Gambling, accounts in half the shops in Cheston with outstanding debts owed, ladies of ill repute, even criminal activity. He was leeching off my cousin's plantation and had almost spent her into the poorhouse by the time he died."

"I heard her daughter killed her."

"I hate to say it," he admitted with a nod as they sat down. "The two of them were arguing because Annette felt overwhelmed because Arthur's debts were making turning a profit on the plantation impossible and wanted to sell the plantation and move to Lanna, but Cynthia didn't want to lose the plantation or leave Cheston. They came to blows over it in an argument, and Annette fell and broke her neck during the scuffle. So, now Cynthia is serving two years in the Stocks for her mother's death, and I'm here getting

this place back to where it earns a profit, since all Arthur's debts were absolved when Annette died. Those debts can't be imposed against the children or the estate, it's an old Cheston law protecting rightful inheritance."

That surprised him, for he thought it was Ledwell's death that may have caused it. "Tragic," he noted, not feeling much emotion over it.

"Cynthia was devastated," he sighed. "She hadn't meant to kill her mother, it was all a horrible accident. But the law's the law, and here in Cheston you have to serve time even if you accidentally kill someone, if it happens during a fight or whatnot. So, if you don't mind my asking, what business did you have with my cousin?"

"Settling an old debt between her and me over something she did to me," he answered in a flat voice. "But with her dead, it's a moot point now."

"Come now, sir, I'm sure you can be honest about it. I don't believe Ann would do anything illegal or uncivilized. She was a gentle woman, even more so after Arthur died. She didn't have a hateful bone in her body, she was just blinded by love."

"We'll see," Kyven said, looking at the coyote. "Jewel."

"Umm, yes, Master Steady?"

"Have you been treated well since Arthur Ledwell was killed?"

She looked at him with surprised eyes. "Uh, yes, Master. Mistress Annette was kind. She tore down the huts and built a dorm for the field workers, gave them better food, allows us free range of the plantation, even gives the field workers a day off every other week during planting season, four days off after harvest, and fewer hours during the winter crop season."

"And she lets you talk."

Jewel gave him a steady look. "Yes, Master. Since Master Arthur died, we've been allowed to talk."

“How did she pay for the dorm if she was so far in debt?”

“She said some things were worth going into debt for,” Tyler answered for her. “She borrowed the money for the dorm from my mother, her Aunt Lilly. Mother believes that a happy Arcan works harder, so she was more than happy to lend her the money.”

Kyven looked to Lightfoot, who only shrugged. Maybe that moment of epiphany for Annette Ledwell, when she faced the monster inside her when she nearly killed Kyven with the collar, had a more lasting effect than just showing Kyven mercy. She seemed to have been a far more kindly mistress than her husband.

Maybe Annette Ledwell had indeed changed...and changed for the better.

“Then my business here is done,” Kyven said, standing up. “I consider the matter settled, and I must be on my way. You should really think about getting yourself and your Arcans to Cheston, Master May.”

“No, we’ve put too much work into this place to abandon it,” he said. “And we’re just simple cotton farmers, sir. We pose no threat to anyone.”

“War doesn’t work like that, son,” Kyven told him grimly. “So you’d better hope that the war doesn’t find you down here.”

“We’ll manage, sir,” he said. “I really wish you’d tell me what this was about. Now I’m worried that my cousin was up to no good.”

“No, nothing like that. And you wouldn’t understand even if I explained it to you. We’ll see ourselves out. Good day to you.”

“Good day to you then, guess I’ll go back to fighting with the gin.”

Kyven had Lucky resaddle Strider almost right as he took the saddle off, lost in thought. Maybe Annette Ledwell did change. Maybe she had seen what her husband was doing and moved to make things right. He looked to what he thought was a barn, but was actually a dorm. A dorm, for the workers.

He'd come here expecting to punch Annette Ledwell in the face several times for what she did to him. Instead, he mounted up and rode away, pondering the power of the human spirit and its capacity for change.

Chapter 12

The Pens.

The *Pens*.

The most famous organized club for the display of fighting Arcans in Noraam, where civilized men and women paid hundreds of chits to watch brutalized Arcans rip each other to shreds in the arena, for their amusement. A place where the only spoils earned by the victor was that he had to eat his victim, or starve.

And they called Arcans *animals*.

Kyven could barely contain himself as he approached the roughly circular building known as the Pens, and saw the ever-present buzzards circling on the far side of the building, where they dumped the bones. This was a place of death, a place of pain and fury and hopelessness and despair, a place where the trauma of the Arcans had literally seeped into the very earth and created a dark pall that Kyven could physically sense. This place had taken on the very evil that was perpetrated within, a place where the earth beneath it hungered for the blood spilled by the unwilling combatants forced to fight to the death for the twisted amusement of men and women who believed that they were the epitome of the civilized man.

Kyven hadn't just walked up to this place. After leaving the Ledwell plantation, he had made sure to make the rounds in Cheston to learn about the Pens, so he knew what he was getting into when he came here. The place was famous, so there was all kinds of information about it. The first thing he learned was that he wouldn't have Lightfoot's help here. Just like at the Blue Ring, they had anti-Arcan devices all around the place both to keep their fighters in and to keep the Shaman out. No Arcan could enter or leave the Pens unless they were in a rolling cage set up to pass through that

protection. There were also over a hundred men working at the Pens, from cleaners to Arcan handlers to fight organizers to the handsome and pretty men and women who wore smart attire and showed the guests to their seats or brought them drinks. There was even a restaurant within the building for the dining pleasure of the patrons, staffed by the finest Nurysian chefs. It took Kyven a little longer to glean the information he wanted, and that was that the Arcans as well as the monsters they occasionally imported for the Arcans to fight were held in dungeon-like cellars under the polished and cultured upper floors, transported into the arena by elevators and a stairway so they were completely isolated away from the patrons. The arena was enclosed within a steel cage, and had been so for over fifty years, when a fighting Arcan had somehow slipped his collar and jumped into the stands, killing nearly thirty people before being killed himself.

But the time of the Pens was at an end. Kyven had come here for two related reasons. He was going to free the fighting Arcans held within, and he was going to eradicate this blight on the earth from existence. But it wouldn't remove the taint from the land; he knew, almost instinctively, that nothing would ever grow on the earth left behind after the building was gone. It would be a permanent scar, an ugly wound on the earth where a decent man would feel unwelcome and no animal would willingly enter. That was the extent of the evil that had been perpetrated on this land.

This was one of the reasons why he had been brought into being, he realized grimly as he rode his borrowed horse towards the octagonal building. No Arcan Shaman could enter the Pens, at least if one believed the stories. An Arcan Shaman could probably get in, but he'd have to do it in the guise of a fighting Arcan. It was the rumored defenses inside that Kyven wondered about. The owners of the Pens were paranoid about protecting their fighting stock against rivals and were rightfully terrified of the Shaman, and had gone to extreme, almost insane lengths to defend the building against outside forces. From what was said, no alchemical device except the collars and the devices used to control the Arcans worked within the Pens. That meant that to a lesser extent, Shaman magic also wouldn't function within, since Shaman magic was basically the same thing as

alchemy. Even from where he was, eh could see that the outer walls, while gaily decorated, were reinforced, which meant that the Pens was almost like a fortress. The workers within were all armed, even the pretty-faced serving staff, with both pistols and alchemical impact rods that worked inside, protection against the Arcans as well as from unruly patrons, and Kyven would almost guarantee that there was some kind of mass-effect black crystal death device in there as a last resort against an Arcan uprising, like the one that had been on the Flauren slaver.

Those were what he was up against. He was going in there alone, into a place where his powers weren't supposed to work, armed with nothing but his posts knives, an understanding of the layout of the place, and a whole lot of balls.

It would get even dicier after he got them out. He would preferred to do this at night, when he could take the Arcans out under the cover of darkness, but there were no matches scheduled for tomorrow, so it had to be done today. Today was a match day, and they were holding special early afternoon matches, a matinee. Instead of shutting down because of the impending attack, the rulers of Cheston had demanded the Pens stay open as morale and entertainment for a nervous populace, even hold matches at this early hour, the first match scheduled to start two hours past noon. That meant that when he got them out, he was looking at six or so hours of daylight where he'd have to keep them moving, keep them hidden and out of sight but still moving where they needed to go until sunset, and do it while avoiding any pursuit the Pens and Cheston set on them. He had to hold out until sunset, when they'd be able to move with much more freedom under cover of darkness. It was going to be dangerous, but he had no choice.

How often that meme of helplessness seemed to come up. What else could he do?

Kyven was riding his horse towards the Pens, and while he had no one in front of him, there were two carriages behind him holding the upper crust of Cheston society. He was dressed in the current Cheston fashion for a

gentleman of means, a black waistcoat with tails and a frilly linen undershirt, tight-fitting black trousers tucked into knee-high polished leather boots, and carrying a riding quirt. His posts knives were under his belt, which was covered over by a red sash, within easy reach if he needed them, and Lightfoot and Lucky were hiding with the Lupans and Strider not far from the building, in a stand of sea pines between the Pens and the Angry Sea. Out past the boneyard.

Trinity, he hated that Lucky had to see that. The boy was too young to see such horrors, and the vast pit filled with thousands of splintered and chewed bones was the definition of a horror.

Spirit sight showed him that the stories were true. There was an almost shimmering glow around the Pens, probably from a buried device that encircled it, that had to be the Arcan shield. Much like the Blue Ring's protection, that was how they kept their Arcans from escaping even if they got out of their cages. As he got closer, he saw his suspicions confirmed when he could make it out under the ground, covered over by the grass and hard to see at a distance, but he had to abandon spirit sight once he got closer, where they might see the glow of his eyes. He *did* feel it, however, when he passed over that buried device, for it sought to sever him from his connection to the spirit world, and he realized it would attack any crystal that passed over it, seeking to drain it. It was anti-magic as well as being anti-Arcan, and the first line of defense against a Shaman.

Clever. Alchemical means were about the only way someone could conceivably free and steal an Arcan, and their device eliminated that threat before they got within fifty rods of the front gate.

A brief test showed that his magic did indeed not work within the area of protection, like that anti-magic field in the Loremaster headquarters, but curiously enough, his shadow powers *did* function, despite them being magical in nature. Perhaps their device was tailored to stopping alchemical magic, and his shadow powers, while magical in nature, were *not* alchemical, nor were they Shamanic, which was simply an alternate definition of alchemical. He realized that while magic was suppressed in

here, a monster's powers would function, and not just his own. His shadow powers were monstrous in origin, being the powers of a shadow fox. If his shadow powers worked, then the magical powers of other monsters worked too.

More show for the masses, he reasoned. What good was going out and catching a thunder lizard if it couldn't shoot lightning at the hapless Arcans tasked to fight it?

Either way, it worked to his advantage. He could live without Shaman magic so long as he had his shadow powers, and he could live without his shadow powers as long as he had his Shaman magic.

Another reason he seemed tailor-made to be the one to end the Pens, he felt.

A handsome groom, his blond hair done just so and with a brilliant smile, took his horse as he reached the ponderous gates of the Pens, beyond which was a richly appointed wide hall with festive decorations interspersed between tastefully understated doorways. Those led to private parlors, worker storerooms, and hallways that went deeper into the octagonal construction. From what he gathered, the restaurant was to the left, and the brandy parlor, a gathering place for men, was to the right. There was a sitting parlor for the women closer to the hollow inner ring of the building on the right, where ladies of temperate disposition could go to recover if the bloodsport in the ring below offended their delicate constitutions. There was a betting room right next to the stands on the left, a saloon complete with various gambling amenities leading off the main arena floor on the right, and the back side of the construction as well as the rear quarters were taken up by offices, kitchens, storage rooms, and other utilitarian needs.

As a patron, Kyven would be limited to the public areas of the Pens, areas clearly defined due to the fact that any door leading out of the public areas was locked by alchemical means...means that weren't affected by the antimagic protections. The staff carried keys to those doors, but were limited; kitchen staff could only open the doors dealing with the kitchens,

the handlers only the doors leading to the cages, and so on and so on. This was no real barrier to him, but he needed to know how they worked when the time came to get the Arcans out of here. He'd need a key or two, but he already knew how he was going to get one; the Arcan handlers in the cellar would have to have keys, else they couldn't get into the cellar in the first place.

The first thing, though was to find the way down to the cellars from the first floor. There had to be a way, probably through the staff areas, and he needed to know where it was and what to expect when the Arcans came out that way. But getting in there wouldn't be easy, for interspersed at strategic locations were curious little bronze boxes with crystals embedded in them, which everyone agreed were alchemical viewing devices that allowed the staff to see what was going on in front of them. They functioned despite the anti-magic field, but for Kyven, these were both a minor inconvenience and a handy means of testing a theory. He tracked down the lavatory, a poshly appointed place filled with gleaming porcelain and with indoor plumbing, found the viewer that kept a watch on the entrance, then casually reached up and touched it as he went past, where no other viewer could see what he was doing. That touch told him that the device was shielded somehow, protected from the field, probably by its curious bronze-iron casing. However, that casing wasn't designed to stop a Shaman, who simply reached *through* it and touching on the crystal that powered that function, using it as a conduit, and draining the crystal very quickly. Kyven himself wasn't shielded the way the device was, so the magic he drained was almost instantly shunted away from him, drained away by the field. So, he couldn't draw on the present crystals to channel spells, but he could drain any devices he came across.

So, the key to all of this was the field. All he had to do was find what was powering the field and drain it, much like that big crystal he saw in the Loremaster building was responsible for the anti-magic field that protected the towers. He doubted that the device's power source was buried, so it had to be somewhere in the building. If he could find that crystal and drain it, then he'd crack the Pens open like a walnut.

And for this, it required the unique powers granted him by his totem. Kyven stepped into the shadows he converged around himself, and fought off the disorientation and vertigo that came with crossing into the shadow world. The *things* were far from him, but the instant he entered their domain, they took notice of him. He could sense it. They seemed to start moving towards him, but he'd learned that they took quite a while to find him if he himself was not moving very far within their world. He used his position to look around, look beyond what he could have seen in the normal world, looking past the voids created by the light and looking into the shadowed areas of the building. He saw many Arcans below him in darkened cells, he saw quite a few supplies and devices of control and torture that made him shiver at the thought of them, and saw a few people as they entered areas of shadow during their nightly rounds. He was searching for a room that might hold a large crystal or some kind of alchemical device, then realized that in the shadow world, the anti-magic field could not touch him. He opened his eyes to the spirits while within the shadow world, something he had done many times before, and that caused the living to jump out within the shadows, as well as caused active alchemical devices to jump out to his eyes.

There! He saw a flicker at the edge of his vision. He turned towards where he saw it, looking past several other shadows, then he saw it again. Someone passed in front of a light source and cast a shadow on a very large red crystal, pulsing to his spirit sight as it powered something big, and that shadow revealed it to him here in the shadow world. That may or may not be what he was after, but it was a good place to start. When he was doing what he was doing, it was difficult to match up the real world to what he was seeing due to the shifting nature of the shadow world, where distances could actually change, but he'd had enough experience to get a good idea of *roughly* where that crystal was in relation to where he was in the real world. It was under him, down in the cellar, which was another good sign, on the south side of the building, under where the staff kept their offices and other staff-only rooms.

To just appear in that room that obviously had someone in it was foolish, but he did need to get closer. He took several steps, sliding along the shifting shadows, until he was facing a shadow of a dark, rough-stoned corridor that was in the cellar. He saw bars along one wall, and he realized it was more or less what he was looking for, a corridor in the cellar. He stepped into that wavering shadow, stepped into the representation of reality present there in the shadow world, then converged a gateway back and stepped through it even as he willed it to pass around him.

He appeared in a dark corridor with a sand-covered floor, and immediately it was the smell that hit him. The smell of blood, the smell of rotting meat, the smell of unwashed, bloody Arcans, the smell of festering wounds. He had a rough stone wall on either side of him, but there were bars on both sides of the walls both in front of him and behind. There was a sconce that held an alchemical lamp, but it was dark, inoperative, which provided the shadows through which he could see into the real world. He knew from his sense of things that the crystal was ahead of him, somewhere in the warren of underground passages that extended under the Pens like a spiderweb.

He stepped up to the nearest bars and looked in, and saw something that almost made him sick. There was a female wolf Arcan in the cell, laying on the sandy floor, sand that was saturated with blood. The smell of festering wounds was coming from her, for she had almost all of the pitch black fur ripped away from her thigh and had a quartet of deep, pus-filled lacerations going from hip, around the front of her thigh, and ending halfway down to her knee. She had been a victor in a match, but wasn't important enough for them to treat. They threw her in here to die, and when she was dead, they'd just excise her festering wound and feed her to the others.

He drained the cell door's alchemical lock and stepped inside almost immediately. Closing the door behind him, he knelt by the panting Arcan, whose collar was still around her neck. Getting closer to her, he could see the scars on her shoulder, back, and face, jagged lines where her fur no longer grew, wounds from her fights. She had clearly won more than one

fight, but they still didn't consider her important enough to treat. Her eyes snapped open and she tried to roll towards him, or maybe away from him, but a hand on her shoulder quelled her almost instantly. She was too conditioned to obey the humans to object to anything he might do, even in her illness-induced haze.

Ah, no wonder. Her face wasn't black, it had a patch of grizzled gray that started over her muzzle and eyes and framed her muzzle, but that wasn't what had his attention. Her left eye was a blood-filled orb, and she'd probably lost sight in it. They had no use for an Arcan fighter who had a blind side. She'd probably been hit in the face or poked in the eye with enough force to rupture the vessels in her eye. He was amazed they hadn't killed her immediately. Maybe they threw her in here to see if she recovered, and if so, then they could breed her. If not, well, the other Arcans had to eat.

"Calmly, little sister," he said in a gentle voice, touching her on the side. "I'm here to help."

Despite the collar, she couldn't stop her derisive snort. He couldn't blame her.

The field may drain away his magic, but he'd bet it would have problem draining magic that had somewhere to go the instant it was pulled out of her collar. He put one hand on her collar and the other hand over her festering wounds, and built the image of the spell to cure diseases in his mind. Instead of beckoning to the fox for the power to cast the spell, he instead drained it from the collar and instantaneously channeled that magic into his spell. The field did try to interfere, tried to draw the energy away, but Kyven was too righteously pissed off to let that happen. By sheer determination, he kept the magic focused into his spell, not letting the field interfere, and under his hand the sickness causing her infection was eradicated. He could do nothing for the wounds, which would probably just get infected again anyway, but it would buy her some time.

His work on her had cleared her fever in addition to purging the sickness from her leg, and she blinked up at him with suddenly lucid eyes, one amber eye and one blood-filled orb gazing at him in confusion. "I am Shaman, little sister," he said in a low voice. "I'm here to take you and all the others away from this vile pit."

"Spirits...be...praised," she wheezed, getting her breath back. "I'm glad...I lived long enough...to see it."

"You can help me, little sister," he said quickly. "There's a room here that has a large crystal in it, I think it powers the device that traps you in here. I have to find it before I can get you out of here. Do you know where it is?"

"No, Shaman," she said in reply, reaching up with her clawed and putting it on his face reverently. "You're...human."

"I know, little sister," he smiled. "I'm the only human Shaman we know of. But don't hold that against me. I'm here to save you if I can, or end your pain if I must."

"Either...would be welcome. Please, Shaman. If you can't get me out, kill me. I want to be free, one way or another."

"I hope it doesn't come to that, but if it does, I will make it quick and painless, my little sister," he said with absolute honesty, putting his hand on her upper chest solemnly. He then pulled off his waistcoat and ripped it in half between the tails, then started wrapping it around her leg. "I've cured the fester in your wound, little sister, but I have no healing ability. This is the best I can do for you."

"They call me Ebony, Shaman. Well, they called me the Ebon Death, but I like to think of myself as Ebony."

"Ebony it is," he smiled. "Now you lay here and rest. I'll come back for you while you recover your strength, after I find that room. Just be still and pretend the door is still locked, but mind that it is open if you must get out. But please stay in here until I come back for you, or you're sure they

caught me and I won't come back. If you raise an alarm, I may have trouble finding the crystal..”

“I will. Will you bless me?”

He smiled and put his hand on her head and recited the ritual benediction, which made her tail shiver in delight.

“Be strong, little sister.”

“For you, Shaman, anything. Anything,” she said, putting her head back on the sand and closing her eyes.

He was a little worried someone may look in and see the bandage on her leg, but that was a risk he'd just have to take. That wound was open and raw, and she'd lost enough blood already. He should have left her some water, but he didn't know where it was and didn't have the time to track some down for her. She'd have to endure it until he could get back to her, and he *would* get back to her.

The other cages were mostly full, all filled with Arcans in various stages of recovery from wounds suffered in the arena. Not all of them were as far gone as the wolf, and Kyven encountered some hostility from the next Arcan he tried to check, a willowy male feline of some sort, a cat but with broader features and a spotted coat. He was probably one of the rare breeds. He hissed at Kyven reflexively when he drained the cage door and entered, backing into a corner. The cat's eyes weren't vacant the way feral Arcans were, so this reaction was conditioned. This male had been abused to the point where he retreated away from his conscious self to deal with the trauma of being thrown into a cage and being forced to kill another Arcan or be killed himself. But the male was no match for Kyven's strange affinity for wild Arcans, which translated to an Arcan who was traumatized to the point where he acted on instinct. He knelt down and held out a single hand and spoke reassuringly, which started working its way into the male's mind. His back came down, he assumed a less threatening posture, and then warily approached. Kyven kept his hand out until the male literally pushed his head against it tentatively. Kyven kept a calming hand on his shoulder as

he checked a quartet of nasty gashes in the male's spotted coat along his ribs. It was almost to the bone, and if he'd been hit like that in his stomach, it would have disemboweled him. He also had three deep bite wounds on his upper arm, shoulder, and left thigh, and thankfully none of them were infected. They were all healing fairly well, actually. Kyven drained his collar as well, then urged him down to the sand. "Just be calm, little brother," he told the half-crazed Arcan. "Rest. I'll be back for you soon."

Though he desperately wanted to, he knew he couldn't check on every Arcan in every cage ahead of him, for there were too many and every moment he was down here he risked coming across a worker, who might raise an alarm. He gritted his teeth and kept his eyes dead ahead as he passed several cages, knowing if he looked in it would be his undoing and he would rush into the cage to care for the Arcan within. He marched right down the hallway, until a sudden voice caught him off guard. "Hey! What are you doing down here?" a harsh voice called. Kyven turned around to see a man wearing leathers standing there, holding a pain stick. This was one of the handlers, a man who earned his living off the misery of the Arcans around him. He was a tall, whip-thin man with a pockmarked face and small eyes set close together. His teeth were yellow and rotten, and he looked none too clean. If not for the stench of this place, Kyven was fairly sure he'd have smelled him from there. Kyven swallowed his impulse to murder the man and put on an innocent face, acting and lying for all he was worth. "Why, thank the Father someone found me!" he said in a relieved voice. "I've been lost down here forever!"

"How did you get down here?"

"Why, I was looking for a bathroom and went through an open door. I got lost in a bunch of hallways, and then I ended up down here. I *knew* I never should have went down those stairs!" he said, smacking himself in the forehead with his palm. "Can you help me get out of here?"

The man didn't look all that accommodating. In fact, he kept his pain stick in a ready position, and that device had *all* of Kyven's attention. He was intimately familiar with just how much they hurt, and he had to

suppress a moment of unconscious panic at seeing it and being around all those bars, memories of his own imprisonment and torture threatening to rise up in him.

“Ain’t no way you could have got down those stairs,” he said aggressively. “I think you’re gonna go see the boss, stranger.”

“If it gets me out of here, then lead on, good fellow,” Kyven answered immediately. “I have nothing but the truth on my side.”

“Just go the way you’re goin’, fella,” the man said cautiously.

“Certainly. But just why do you think I couldn’t have gotten down the stairs? I had no problem at all.”

“You ain’t got no key, fella, and you can’t get in the stairs without a key.”

“You don’t say,” Kyven murmured. “I do hope you’re taking me back upstairs.”

“That’s why we goin’ this way, fella.”

“So, you must have a key.”

“Yeah, what of it?”

The man didn’t even have time to react. Kyven whirled on him, his hand behind his back, and it came out holding three posts knives. The man lunged without seeing the knives to spear Kyven with the pain stick, but he loosed all three knives at nearly point blank range, even as he twisted to avoid the pain stick. One knife just plain missed, one hit the man in the left side of his face flat, bouncing off harmlessly, but the third drove the point right into his right eye. It didn’t have enough force behind it to kill, but it punctured his eyes, causing a grayish fluid to spurt out of it, and his head snapped back even as he howled in agony. Kyven moved with blazing speed, sidestepping the pain stick, turning, and crushing his fist into the left side of the man’s face. Kyven wasn’t trained in fighting, but he was monstrously strong from his Shaman training and had been taught the

basics by Lightfoot, so he knew how to throw an effective punch, coming from his hips as he rotated his entire body into the blow. All that power unloaded against the man's cheek, and his head snapped back with enough force to send the knife in his eye socket flying. The man staggered back, stunned, but Kyven didn't give him a chance. He grabbed the shaft of the pain stick safely under its area of operation, grabbed the man by the neck, and yanked his head back to look Kyven in the eyes. His right eye was deflated in his socket, hanging limply partially out of the socket as fluid and blood poured down his face, but his left eye locked with Kyven's own. "Now face your fear," Kyven hissed in a voice of doom, and built the spell the fox had taught him, drained the power out of the pain stick to power it, and unleashed it against the man.

In his mind, his greatest fear manifested, an unignorable phantom that attacked his mind. The man's face turned bone white, and he screamed shrilly, in abject terror, and dropped to the ground writhing and twisting, causing what was left of his right eye to detach from his head and splat to the sandy ground. "Get 'em off get 'em off get 'em off!" he squealed, rolling in the sand as he wet his pants and voided his bowels, which just added to his stink. Kyven advanced and put a boot on his stomach, holding him down, and the man looked up at him and almost fainted. He couldn't see Kyven, he saw the phantom in his own mind, that which he feared the most. The fox said some men would fight when faced with their fear, some would run, and some would just go to pieces. She said some might even die from the shock. This man was one of the runners, it seemed, but he remained coherent enough to possibly answer a few questions.

"Where is the power source for the device that keeps the Arcans in?" he asked in a strong voice.

The magic that fueled the spell was drained off by the field, and caused the phantoms to vanish. The man looked up at Kyven with a horrified single eye, blood still oozing steadily down his cheek, and he wheezed when Kyven put his boot on the man's belly. "What are you?" he gasped in shock.

“I am a Shaman,” Kyven declared proudly. “Now, unless you want to live with your little friends crawling all over you for the rest of your life, you’re going to answer my questions quickly and honestly.”

The man turned even more pale.

“Where is the crystal that powers the device that traps the Arcans inside?” he demanded.

“I, it must be in the big room on the south end. At the stairs, take the right passage heading south, then turn right at the fork. It has to be in there, we’re not allowed inside! Don’t let them bite me, please! I’ll do anything! Anything!”

“Give me your key.”

The man immediately reached under his leather jerkin with shaking hands, and withdrew a circular pendant suspended on a sturdy metal chain. He pulled it over his head and offered it to Kyven, his hand trembling violently.

“How many Arcans are in here?”

“A hundred and three!”

“How do they come in?”

“The entry ramp on the west side! It comes in from outside!”

“How many workers are in here?”

“I dunno exactly, maybe thirty, but most are upstairs! There’s only nine handlers who move the Arcans for matches on match day!”

“So I’ll only find eight other men down here?”

“Us and maybe the boss, he comes down to check on things sometimes!”

“Is there a last-ditch device down here to kill the Arcans?”

He swallowed. “Yes!” he said when Kyven gave him a cold look.

“How is it worked?”

“They can hit it from upstairs!” he answered. “In the control room!”

“Where is the device itself?”

“Everywhere, in every cell!”

“Then where is the crystal that powers it?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know!” he squealed when Kyven raised a hand and pointed an ominous finger at the man. “Maybe near where they have the other one, I don’t know!” He actually started to cry, tears leaking out of his remaining eye. “Don’t kill me!” he blubbered.

“Oh, I’m not going to kill you,” Kyven said in an empty voice, lunging down and grabbing the man by the shirt, a shirt stained with blood. He enacted his shadow powers and caused an explosion of darkness around the two of them, which caused the man to scream, but that scream was cut short to the Arcans in the cells as Kyven converged a gateway around both himself and the handler, pulling them into the shadow world. The man wobbled on the, well, whatever it was beneath them on which he was laying, as the vertigo of the place assaulted his senses, vertigo to which Kyven was much more resistant. “I’m going to let *them* kill you,” he finished, hauling the man up, then turning and hurling him away. He exerted his will against this shadowy place, altering its dimensions, which sent the man hurtling far, far away from him. He felt the *things* sense that sudden and great movement and rush towards it with great speed, attracted by the wholesale alteration of their environment and sensing the warmth of the man. Kyven took a single step back, his face an emotionless mask, then he converged a gateway back to the real world.

Even from where was, he heard the man’s agonized, keening shriek when the *things* finally caught one of the invaders of their domain. But it only bolstered his reserve as he returned to the real world. They *all* deserved that fate. Every spirits-damned one of them, even the vapid

waitresses upstairs serving their drinks and showing off their tits. They lived on the agony of others, and they deserved an agonizing death in return.

Leaving the handler to the things in the shadow world was more a brutally practical means of disposing of the body more than any kind of poetic vengeance against them, though it certainly made him feel much better. Kyven put the key around his own neck, picked up the man's now depleted pain stick, and then deliberately broke it over his knee. "Shaman," an Arcan called from a cell. "Shaman," another joined in, and they started to chant in a low, reverent tone. "Shaman. Shaman. Shaman."

Kyven didn't look at them. He knew he couldn't bear it, not yet. He just fixed his eyes down the hallway. "Calmly, my brothers and sisters," he declared in a strong voice. "Be patient, and I'll get you out of here soon. But you must remain quiet. Nothing happened," he said simply, then he started walking forward, carrying the broken pain stick.

"Shaman," several of them whispered, and then they fell silent and returned to the interior of their cells, obeying him.

After collecting up his knives, Kyven marched right down the center of the hallway, until he reached what was obviously the stairs. He also saw why the handler didn't believe he got down here, for there was a shimmering aura of magical light curtaining the foot of them, a barrier of some kind operating despite the field, which no doubt required a key to bypass. He'd approached from the east, and beyond the stairs and down a short hallway was a large open area, the open void under the arena floor where the Arcans were loaded in the elevators or pushed up the stairs and up to the arena floor, where they would then try to tear each other apart for the amusement of the gentry of Cheston. There was movement in the big room, and Kyven saw three separate handlers move through his field of vision, some of them leading collared and handcuffed Arcans. Kyven advanced up to where he could see better, and saw six handlers and ten Arcans in the large area, obviously preparing for the first matches of the

day. The Arcans looked grim, not looking at each other, not looking at Arcans they may have to kill in order to survive.

To go south, he had to enter that area and come under the scrutiny of the handlers, or bypass it by shadow walking and risk that the *things* in there were waiting for him on the other side.

He stepped into the shadow world rather than risk a confrontation with six men without an illusion to hide behind, taking a single step and looking for a shadow to show him what was there. He could sense that the man he's left here was dead, and there was a sense of *contentment* that seemed palpable in the place. The *things* were happy, but when Kyven appeared in their domain, they again moved to the hunt, defending their territory from an invader. But they didn't have the chance to catch him, for he found a suitable shadow not far from where he'd seen the crystal, in a storeroom of sorts, and converged a gateway back into the real world and stepped through it even as he willed it to pass over him. He emerged into a storeroom holding boxes of leather harnesses and muzzles, and there were handcuffs and leg irons hanging on the walls. He ignored it and stepped out of the storeroom, checked both sides of the passage, then headed down it. There wasn't anyone in this part of the complex, and he could *feel* the crystal as he approached it. In fact, he could feel two of them. One of them was definitely red, and the other chilled his soul, because it was a large black crystal.

Kyven paused to consider something. He'd never tried to drain a *black* crystal, and it might be dangerous—it might be downright deadly. That was directly absorbing energy that was, by its very nature, the anathema of life. That could very well kill him. If a cut black crystal could instantly kill if it was touched to a bleeding wound, bypassing the skin, then trying to drain a black crystal would be drawing that death energy directly into his body... which was basically the same thing. No, he couldn't drain the black crystal, but he *could* pull it out of its device. And they'd have a bloody fun time trying to put it back in its socket after Kyven shattered it. That he more than knew how to do, because he was a crystalcutter by trade, and any crystal could be shattered if it was hit right.

He went back to the storeroom and collected up a few leather harnesses and a set of leg irons, then advanced up the hallway.

He found the black crystal first. It was in a room that required him to shadow walk to bypass its locked door, and it was in the center of a spiderweb of black steel tubes that extended into the walls in every direction. That was how they would kill the Arcans, the black crystal would discharge its energy into those tubes, which no doubt led to every cell in the compound. The crystal in the device was shockingly large, nearly fourteen points, which was *huge* for a black crystal. It was the size of a child's fist. Kyven didn't have gloves to safely handle it, but that was why he brought the harness. Using the leather of the harness as a buffer, he reached in and wrapped the leather around the crystal, then pulled it out; one didn't handle cut black crystals without great care, since they may have been cut with sharp edges, and a single cut could be fatal. Unless he cut it himself, he would assume any black crystal had a point somewhere that might break the skin, then kill the one holding it. He pulled it out and put it on the stone floor, arrayed the harnesses around it so they'd absorb the majority of the flying shards, then he picked up the manacle and studied the crystal. His innate sense of crystals, part of his Shaman ability, allowed him to understand the structure of the crystal and know how to hit it. Whoever cut it had done a damn good job, though, he had to admit. It was perfectly cut to bring out its maximum potential. He then reared back and smacked the crystal with the rounded side of the manacle.

There was a distinct *CRACK*, and the crystal shattered. A few flecks of deadly black crystal showered out around the manacle, but all of them went laterally, hitting the straps of leather. Kyven carefully and expertly gathered up all the pieces of the crystal, took off his sash, dumped them into it, and tightly bundled it up before tying it around his belt like a pouch. A handful of black crystal shards might be useful, to the army if not to him.

He found the red crystal not twenty paces from the room holding the death device, and it was connected into a bronze box that had tubes extending from it and into the walls in all four directions, going out to the outer ring, most likely. Kyven tested it by putting his hand on it and

shunting its power to him instead of into the device, and immediately the field suppressing his powers began to waver.

This was it.

The crystal had to be forty points, one of the biggest he'd ever seen, and it must have cost them a *fortune*. But, there was another box stored in the corner that had nine individual sockets in it for crystals, which showed that this device was made to be able to run on one crystal or many, which was rather clever. It was the size of a man's head. Kyven debated taking it, but since it was cut and socketed, it couldn't be put in any other device, it was bound to the box in which it was placed. All it could power would be his magic, but he wouldn't need it once he pulled it out of there.

Instead of draining it or removing it, he instead shattered it. It took only a single hand, and he drained only certain parts of the crystal, along a few internal flaws, which caused the crystal to shudder, flare with bright ruby light, and then implode. He flinched his hand away to prevent getting shards in his hand when the crystal shattered.

The field around him wavered, and then vanished. Immediately, he opened his eyes to the spirits. And almost at the same time, he heard a deafening klaxon go off in the room, a warning to those above that the device wasn't functioning.

That was damn clever. They must have put a second device in here that was suppressed by this one, and once this one failed, that one activated. He tracked down the device quickly, a large box on the wall, and got a hand on it and drained it of its crystal quickly. The ear-splitting klaxon gave a startled gurgle, and then fell silent once its power was drained, but left his ears ringing.

He had to move fast, and he knew it. He got over to the device and stood behind it, watching with spirit sight, and not a moment later a man ran down the stairs and into the passage leading this way. Kyven collected himself and channeled an illusion into the room as the man in a handsome black suit and a short woman wearing a dress cut low enough that her

breasts would fall out of it if she bent over too far approached quickly, replacing the crystal with an illusion, exact to the tiniest detail, and instilled with so much substance, drawn on Kyven's vast knowledge of crystals, that the crystal could be touched, would pass virtually inspection. The man pressed a circular key device to the door, which caused it to open, and he looked in with the woman looking in behind him. He saw the crystal in the device, seemingly just fine, and the klaxon silent.

"A hiccup?" the woman asked.

"I guess so," the man replied. "I may have Greenman come and take a look at it. I've never seen it do that before. That crystal is only four months old, it can't be getting weak already."

Hidden by the illusion, Kyven debated killing the man. This man was high-ranking around here, of that there was no doubt, and Kyven would bet that his key would open any door in the compound. But, his disappearance may be noted, and Kyven had too much work to do to do it dodging men bearing pistols and impact rods, as all men and women above were armed. Including these two. Kyven reluctantly let them go, for the welfare of the Arcans at this point was more important than avenging their pain on those that made their fortunes off of it. Ebony and the spotted cat and all the others would need him to get out of here.

But there would be some avenging. Kyven shadow walked back through the door, sensing the *things* were slowly but inexorably finding his location, then stole down the passageway after ensuring the man and woman went back upstairs, back through that glowing curtain of magic that still covered the base of the stairs. The six handlers were still there, the Arcans waiting in grim silence for their forced deathmatches. He wrapped himself in the illusion of the man he killed, then walked confidently out into the open area.

"About time, Cote," one of them said acidly. "I swear, it takes you so long to take a shit, you must have to eat first." The man didn't notice that the man he thought was Cote came out of a different hallway than he'd

entered, and Kyven exploited that fact to get up close to the men before one of them figured that out. One of them turned his back to Kyven to grab the leash of an Arcan, and Kyven silently reached down and pulled his impact rod out of its sheath.

“Hey!” he barked, and then the room plunged into darkness.

Hidden by the shadows, blending into them to be invisible, and using his spirit sight, Kyven laid into the six men with calm efficiency. The impact rod activated when he pulled it, and when he struck the man in the head with it, it shattered his skull and sent him flying like a sack of meal. Kyven barely felt any impact or recoil at all, but it struck with such magical force that it was as if the man was hit by a cannonball. He stepped around the startled Arcan, who was starting to duck, then shattered the face of the next man by hitting him right in the nose, sending blood and bits of flesh and bone flying as his body was blasted in the direction of Kyven’s swing. One of the men shouted loudly and reached for his pistol, but a blow to his side crumpled him around the impact rod and threw him several paces, where he collided with two of the seated Arcans. They gave startled cries, but made no other moves. The other three were stumbling around blindly, one of them reaching for his pistol, and that one Kyven attacked first, jamming the impact rod into he belly. Breath and blood blasted from his mouth as the force of the blow devastated his insides, and he fell to the sand five rods away with blood absolutely pouring out of his nose and mouth. He turned and backhanded one of the two remaining men in the side of the head with the rod, snapping his neck and tearing the flesh of his neck, nearly ripping his head off, then he sprinted at the last man, the farthest away, who had more sense than the others and was trying to flee, his hands out in front of himself as he blindly ran towards a wall, screaming at the top of his lungs. “Shaman!” he screamed. “Shaman in the staging area! Sha—” he started, but the word was shattered along with his jaw when Kyven struck him in the side of the head with the rod, crushing bone and sending him catapulting in a sideways somersault in the direction of his blow, to collapse bonelessly to the sand.

The one he'd hit in the side was moaning and moving feebly. Kyven canceled the shadows, returning the area to visibility, and the two Arcans gaped at him in awe as he padded over put his boot on the back of the man's butt, and brained him with the impact rod. Kyven's eyes were glowing with emerald radiance, and that caused the two Arcans to reach their hands up towards him. "Shaman," one said reverently, and he was actually *crying*.

Kyven cast a quick look about for that last handler, but he was beyond Kyven's ability to see...he might be upstairs. He instead knelt down by the two Arcans, and put his hand on the shoulder of the female bear Arcan who was weeping, a wide-shouldered female that was heavy-bodied, like most bear Arcans were. She too had scars marring her fur, including a nasty one on the bridge of her muzzle, just behind her nose. "Calmly, little sister," he said, sliding his hand up and draining her collar, then pulling it off her. She gasped and put her wickedly clawed hand to her neck, then put both her hands on his chest. "Will you tell me where they keep most of you?"

"That way," she answered, pointing north. "There are some that way, the injured ones," she pointed back to the east, "and a few more that way, mostly the ones they just brought," she finished, pointing to the west.

"Can I trust you not to fight each other if I uncollar you?" he asked loudly, looking at the other Arcans seated not far from him.

"Yes!" a tall, gangly male coyote blurted. The others also agreed, and Kyven quickly uncollared the ten Arcans. He stuffed the impact rod in his belt, then looked at the others. "Take their weapons and wait here," he ordered. "Kill any human that comes down those stairs," he added, pointing to the stairs to the east. "You, come with me," he finished, pointing at a very muscular bull with sharpened metal caps on his horns, a truly monstrous specimen of a bull Arcan.

"What would you have me do, Shaman?" he asked.

"It never hurts to have a second pair of eyes in enemy territory," he answered, "and you look capable. Besides, I need a strapping strong Arcan to help me, and you fit the bill."

“I would defend a Shaman? I...I’m so honored,” he said with a quavering voice.

“I’m going to be defending you, my large friend,” Kyven chuckled. “Let’s get the others.”

As he promised, he returned to the injury quadrant and first went to the wolf’s cage. She looked at him with bright eyes, then got wary when the huge bull came in behind her. “It’s alright,” Kyven assured her. “Our large friend here is going to carry you out of here. Are you ready?”

“I can walk!” she protested.

“Not until I get a better look at that leg, you’re not,” Kyven told her bluntly. “I’m not asking you, little sister, I’m *telling* you.”

She looked *very* nervous when the huge bull approached her, but she relaxed a little when he did nothing more than gather her into his arms, making the large female almost look like a child. Kyven led the bull back towards the center, but he stopped them with an upraised hand, looking up to the floor above, where three men were moving to come down the stairs, all three armed and ready. They were coming down to investigate the shouting. “They’re coming,” he said. “Go, quickly!” he ordered, hefting the impact rod and wrapping himself in an illusion of one of the men he’d just killed, the one that had shouted. He covered the rod with the illusion, hiding it, and he rushed past the bull and bravely stepped through the magical curtain, which did not impede him because he was wearing a key. He started up the stairs as the three men came down, and they met near the middle. “What the fuck is going on, Connor?” the lead man demanded.

“My fault, my fault,” Kyven apologized in the dead man’s voice. “Cote scared the shit out of me.”

The men looked at him, then one of them laughed. “What did he do?”

“Yeah, like I’m gonna tell you so you can rag on me,” Kyven answered, turning back down the stairs. “Is everything okay up there? We still on schedule for the matches?” he asked, pausing before starting down.

The man blinked. “Uh, yeah, I guess,” he answered.

“Okay, I saw the boss run down here after that gong went off, we weren’t sure what was going on. The boss didn’t explain it when he went back up, he just ran back upstairs.”

“Ah. Yeah, I could understand that,” another said as they too turned and started back upstairs.

Kyven padded back down the stairs, and paused just at the curtain because three Arcans were wound up like springs just around the corner, waiting to brain or shoot anyone that appeared. “Stand down, brothers,” Kyven said in his own voice. “It’s me.”

They backed up quickly as Kyven dispelled the illusion and stepped through the curtain, where the two canines and the coyote breathed a sigh of relief. “Alright, brothers, keep an eye on the stairs,” he ordered.

With the bull’s help, they quickly cleaned out the injured Arcans, laying them on the sand in the staging area. Then, he knew, it was going to get touchy, because he had to free the healthy fighting Arcans, who might not be quite so amenable as those who saw him kill the handlers and the injured. He took stock as he advanced, and saw that the north quadrant was one huge open area with cages built in rows through it. There were one hundred cells in four rows of twenty five, and the cells were barely large enough for the biggest Arcans to lay down in them. All the cells were occupied by a single Arcan except for one, where a huge cat Arcan had a terrified-looking cat female in the cage with him, and he was availing himself of her charms with enthusiasm, her body almost completely surrounded by his as the huge male held her against him and had sex with her. Most of the Arcans were male, with about fifteen or so females. All the females were large, and as Kyven recalled, they only fought other females. Putting a female in the arena with a male was rarely an entertaining match unless the female was extraordinarily large, like that bear in the staging area. Kyven moved up to the middle row, his eyes blazing with emerald light, and his appearance got the attention of quite a few of them. “Little

brothers and sisters!” Kyven shouted. “I am a Shaman! I’m here to get you out of this hellhole! I want all of you to stand by your cage doors so I can get your collars off. When I do, go to the staging area and wait, but *do not leave the staging area*! It’s not safe yet for you to try to escape! And *no fighting*!” he barked commandingly. “I don’t want to see a single drop of blood out there, not when you’re so close to getting out!”

Many of them didn’t believe him, but they changed their minds when he got close, and they could see his eyes. The first one he came to summed up the others, who gaped at his glowing eyes. “But you’re *human*!” he protested, even as Kyven drained the door and opened it without a key.

“Even humans can care about Arcans,” Kyven said simply, reaching over and draining the collar, then pulling it off and tossing it aside.

Much to Kyven’s surprise, the Arcans obeyed him. He released them as fast as he could because he didn’t want to leave them out there unsupervised, and managed to go through the entire paddock in about ten minutes. He kept looking back into the staging area, and though many of the Arcans were agitated and some were dangerously close to the west passage, they obeyed him. Either they obeyed him because he was a Shaman or they obeyed him because he was a human, but they obeyed. No fights erupted, and they waited for him in the staging area.

As he ran back into the staging area, he heard music start upstairs, a bunch of trumpets. Shit, the matches were supposed to start! Any minute now they’d realize that something was very wrong unless he thought fast. He looked at the Arcans, and realized he had some impressive muscle here, but he also had lots of hands.

A fire. Of course!

“Listen!” he barked quickly. “The matches are about to start, and we’re not ready to leave yet! I want everyone right around me to go back to the cells and grab blankets and pile them in front of the stairs. Quickly, we don’t have much time!”

They sure as hell didn't. Two elevators started descending from the roof, which was the floor of the arena above, and the booming voice of the announcer became audible. "Now!" Kyven snapped, and that spurred them to action. A good couple dozen Arcans rushed past him and back into the paddock area, and Kyven bolted across the staging area to the stairs. They arrived with the blankets quickly after he got there, and he took their blankets and tossed them at the foot of the stairs. Once he got enough to sustain a fire, he channeled a blast of fire into them, causing them to erupt into instant, searing flame. More Arcans arrived, and they tossed the blankets onto the fire of their own volition. Kyven ran back out and whistled to get their attention, then urged them forward. "We'll empty the cages in the west passage as we move!" he barked. "We all escape together!"

Again, he was amazed that they obeyed him. He ordered larger Arcans to carry the injured, and they did as he commanded. He led nearly a hundred Arcans into the west quadrant, which was a similar series of open cages spread out along a large open area. These Arcans, however, weren't fighting Arcans. They were very old, or very young, or almost emaciated, they were so thin, or they looked ill. These were the fodder...no. These were the *food*. They bought Arcans specifically to feed them to the fighters, and these Arcans were waiting for their turn to be thrown into a fighter's cage and ripped apart and eaten. Kyven set the tone by opening the nearest cage, holding a clearly elderly female raccoon Arcan, a female who didn't even have a collar on; that was how little regard they had for her. He reached his hand towards her, his expression gentle and reassuring. "Come, little mother, let's get you out of here and away from this hell," he told her.

She gave him a startled look, then burst into tears and collapsed against him. "Shaman, my prayers are answered!" she wailed. "The spirits favor us!"

"They favor us all, little mother," he told her, helping her out of the tiny cubicle, so small she couldn't even lay down in it...and she was a small Arcan. "You, help our little mother," he commanded, pointing at a large,

burly canine, one of the scarred fighters. He looked very wary, but he did take her hand and keep her close to his side.

There were shouts and commands threading to his ears from the staging area, and he turned to look. Men were piled up at the top of the stairs, trying to get down, but the choking smoke was driving them back. The blankets weren't set afire to block the passage, but to choke the stairwell with smoke, since the stairs drew the smoke up like a chimney. That smoke would buy them minutes, but minutes only. They had raised the elevators, and four men each were getting onto them to prepare to ride down to see what the hell was going on. "Men are about to come down the elevators!" he called. "Whoever has the pistols, guard the back! Shoot at them when you can get a clear look! Make them jump off the elevators!" He had to work fast, and he did so, almost running down the line, draining every occupied cage door, and the Arcans within wasted no time bursting out of the cages. To his surprise, the fighting Arcans told them to stay, not to run, repeating his orders to them. They obeyed mostly out of fear, for most of them knew they were sent here to die, sent here to be eaten by the very Arcans who now surrounded them. Kyven hadn't had time to tell them what was going on. He heard a series of shots behind him, as the Arcans with the pistols fired on the guards coming down on the elevators, but Kyven ran back up when he realized he could do something about it. He channeled fire once more, creating blazing balls of flame, and he hurled them at the elevators...not at the men or the platforms, but at the ropes. His aim was unerring because it was his magic that guided them to their targets, and they exploded against the ropes and caused them to burst into immediate and furious flame.

He felt that one. Draining so many doors had actually began to tire him, and channeling fire was taxing for him, especially the way he had used it. He didn't have much left, so he had to get them out of here fast, and do it with a minimum of Shaman magic. But, his attack had the intended effect. The ropes on the left elevator snapped while it was still a good twenty rods in the air, and the four men on it shrieked as they plummeted to the ground. The men on the other elevator lunged for the ropes that weren't on fire, and

two of them managed to grab them before that platform as well had the ropes on one side snap, sending two men to the sandy floor. Of the six men that had fallen, only two of them were moving with any degree of coordination, and both men dropped back to the sandy floor when Kyven's knives hit them. He abandoned his precious posts knives, leaving him with only one left as alarms started sounding up through those now empty holes in the ceiling of the staging area, where the last two men were trying to climb the ropes to get up to the top rather than drop down and face the free Arcans they could see below.

It took Kyven a few minutes to get the rest of the cages open, and he found himself looking at well over one hundred Arcans, most of them huge and scarred and looking anxious, the rest small and afraid. But he led them toward a large pair of doors, near which there were three cage wagons parked. Kyven had them help him get the doors open, and he used spirit sight to look around. Those upstairs hadn't quite figured out that the Arcans could escape yet, and since the customer entrance was on the north side, there wasn't anyone around. The device buried in the ground was inactive, and that meant that they were free to leave. "Alright," Kyven said, bending down and taking off his boots, then grabbing his foxhead medallion in his hand. He enacted its power, and many of the Arcans gasped or cried out when his bones turned to water, and his muscles and flesh and tissue flowed into a new form, as his head sprouted a muzzle and fox ears, as a tail tore through his black breeches and quickly grew fur, and his body changed until the shadow fox Arcan stood before them, eyes still glowing with emerald brilliance. He shook himself to rid his bones of that cold feeling, then regarded them with an authoritative expression. "Don't let anyone fall behind! We all escape together!" He doubted that was going to hold once they were out of this hall, but he didn't want those Arcans carrying the injured or helping the feeble just drop their burdens and run for the trees. But, to head off that kind of nonsense, he pointed at the same coyote he'd freed in the staging area. "You, lead them out. Run straight for the stand of pines there across the way, go about a minute in, then stop and wait. Understand?"

“But what about you, Shaman?” he asked immediately.

“I’ll be bringing up the rear to protect us,” he answered. “Now go! Quickly, we don’t have much time!”

The coyote blinked, then turned and dropped down to all fours and bounded out into the ramped tunnel that led outside. The others quickly followed suit, the unburdened Arcans pulling well ahead of those helping others or carrying the injured. The Arcans tasked to help others and therefore slow down might have wanted to abandon their burdens and run, but the Shaman was behind them, running on his legs and looking back almost as often as he looked forward, his eyes glowing with the unmistakable radiance that marked him as a revered Shaman, and someone they would obey. With him behind them, they did his bidding and carried the wounded, and he protected them as they ran for the trees.

Kyven watched carefully for any sign of pursuit, but there was none. The Pens either didn’t have the manpower to chase down all their Arcans, or they were afraid to tangle with the Shaman who had freed them. There were people looking in their direction, but they didn’t see them for long, since Kyven stopped halfway across the grassy field upon which the Pens was situated, turned, and channeled that last of his strength to set fire to the grass. The grass wasn’t overly dry, but it did catch fire, and that fire slowly began to spread as Kyven backed up, turned, and dropped to all fours to catch up with the trailing edge of the Arcans.

The coyote obeyed him, running about a minute into the trees and stopping. When he got there, coming up behind them, there were a lot of frayed nerves and animosity seething among the Arcans. The fighting Arcans were hostile towards one another, and the other Arcans were afraid of those they knew would eat them if given the chance. Kyven had to defuse this quickly, before Lightfoot and Lucky reached them. “Listen to me,” he called, standing up and getting their attention. “Just leave it all in the Pens,” he ordered. “None of you are going to fight each other, and none of you will *ever* eat the flesh of another Arcan again,” he said with heat. “I know it’s not easy to just abandon what kept you alive, but you’re not

fighting Arcans anymore. You are *free* Arcans, and free Arcans have a *choice*. You can choose to abandon the ways the humans forced on you and return to the ways of your people. It won't be easy, I won't deny that, but it all comes down to you deciding that you don't want to be what they made of you anymore. I won't make you choose what you want to be, but understand that so long as you are with me, you *will* obey me. And I absolutely *forbid* you to fight among yourselves. I absolutely *forbid* you to eat the flesh of your own kind. If you can't obey those two simple rules, well, there's a lot of forest out there, and you don't have to stay with me. But if you do stay with me, I'll take you to an *army* of Arcans that will feed you and protect you. They won't ask you to fight when they attack the humans, and they'll give you all the food you could want."

"But what if we *want* to fight?" a large bear asked.

"Then you may fight, but you won't fight each other," Kyven answered. "You'll fight the humans, and you'll be fighting for your freedom.

"Let me explain what's going on," he told them. "The Arcans have their own nation, far to the west of Noraam, and they are moving against the humans in the open now. We've raised an army of Arcans and sympathetic humans, and we're helping other humans who are opposing the Loremasters for their own reasons. While the Flaurens and the others fight to prevent the Loremasters from taking over Noraam, we will be fighting to free the Arcans from slavery. We hope that when this war is over, we take the Arcans back over the mountains and leave the human lands to the humans. They'll have to do their *own* work, not work the Arcans to death and reward you with nothing but a skinner's knife or a butcher's cleaver.

"I freed you because you deserved to be freed after everything the humans have done to you," he told them. "Yes, I'm hoping that some of you will join the army and fight for us, because the *one* thing the humans taught you was to fight, and you will do it well. But I won't *expect* you to fight. If you decide you won't raise your hand against another ever again, we will honor your decision and allow you to help us in ways other than fighting,

such as foraging food for the army, or cooking, or helping pack and unpack the camp every time it moves and stops. We want you to be free, and part of being free is having the choice to do what you want, within reason. Outside of fighting with the other Arcans or the humans who help us and trying to eat each other, you basically have free rein on what you decide you want to do. Hell, you can even decide to walk out of this clearing and wash your hands of the whole deal, and *I will not stop you*. I will honor your decisions, so long as your decisions don't intrude on the two simple rules I intend to impose on you.

“All I ask is that you listen to me, and try to work together. I know that won't be easy, since I have no doubt the humans made some of you fight each other in the arena, but you have to start somewhere. I'm not the best leader in the world, but I can get you to someone who *is* a great leader, and bring you to a Shaman who can help you far more than I can.

“Now, understand one thing,” he said, motioning to himself. “*This* is the disguise. I'm really human, I just own a device that allows me to take an Arcan shape for brief periods of time, because I can run much faster like this,” he told them, releasing himself from the form. His bones against turned to icy water as he returned to his human self, and he shivered once he had completed the change. He dropped his boots and looked at them. “This is the real me. I'm human, but I *am* Shaman,” he told them intensely. “I believe in everything the Arcan Shaman believe, and I will serve and protect you, because you need me. You are my little brothers and sisters, and I will be your Shaman if you let me. If me being human bothers any of you, say so now.”

Nobody said a word. They all just gaped at him.

“Alright then,” he said, sitting on the ground and starting on his boots. “Everyone rest for a few minutes. I want to check the injured before we move on, and we're also waiting for someone to join us.”

Kyven did just that after he got his boots on, checking each of the twelve injured. He had to purge another infection from a short yet

powerfully built, very rare wolverine Arcan, a breed almost unheard of outside of Haven, but outside of that, there was little he could do for any of them but bandage them, and all he had were his own clothes. By the time he checked Ebony, all the clothing he had left were his belt and breeches, and those had both legs ripped off to the thigh in order to fashion bandages for the injured. "I see the bleeding stopped, little sister," he said to her. "Our first stop will be at a river or creek so everyone can drink. I know you must be thirsty."

"I'll make it, Shaman," she said in a reverent tone. "And I can walk. They don't need to carry me."

"Alright, but only because we're not going very fast. I want to see if they're going to pursue us. I want to see how many soldiers they send out, so I can warn the army. We can easily outrun the soldiers, even with us carrying the injured, so really what we're doing is luring them out."

"I will walk for you, Shaman," she declared, deliberately getting to her feet, as if to prove it to him. He could see that her injured leg was trembling from the effort. "And I will fight for you."

"*You* will do nothing but heal," he told her, standing up and putting his hand on her shoulder, almost having to reach up to do so. "After you're whole, then you can do what you want to do. But until then, you are *my* responsibility, Ebony."

There was a commotion at the edge of camp, and Kyven heard growling. He rushed over there quickly when the two Lupans padded through the trees towards them, and Strider and the Arcans were right behind them. Lucky was actually riding Strider, and Lightfoot was leading the Equar. "Calm down!" he barked. "They're who we're waiting for! They're friends!" The pony-sized Lupans gave the fighting Arcans challenging looks, their tails low and their fangs slightly bared, but Kyven got right in front of them. "Sirra, Dauro, down," he barked, then kicked himself for using the names Lucky gave them. By the spirits, he'd never un-name them now!

“They are yours, Shaman?” a tiny little gray-furred mouse Arcan asked in a meek voice. She couldn’t be more than three years old, not even having developed her adult breasts yet.

“They travel with me, but they are owned by no one,” he answered her. “They are wild, little sister. Remember that before you think about petting one of them. They won’t take kindly to your overture, but they won’t hurt you so long as you leave them be.”

She swallowed and nodded vigorously, taking a step back and partially behind him. He patted each Lupan on the neck fondly as he went past the two seated animals, then hugged Lightfoot. “Fire. Clever,” she told him.

“Thank you. Any trouble?”

She gave him a flat look.

“Fair enough,” he chuckled. “Alright, Lucky, off my Equar. You get to walk like everyone else, even me.”

“Aww, he just got to where he’ll let me ride him!” he protested.

Kyven gave him a slight smile. “Strider,” he said expectantly.

Lucky squealed when Strider suddenly bucked, and the little cat sailed over the Equar’s head and landed on his butt almost at Kyven’s feet. “Good Equar,” Kyven said with a nod.

“You cheater!” Lucky accused, which made Lightfoot laugh. That was noteworthy.

“I am a cheater, Lucky. I thought you were bright enough to figure that out by now,” Kyven said mildly, which made Lightfoot snort, then laugh again. “Lightfoot, which way to the nearest isolated water where we can have a short rest?”

She pointed west. “Half an hour.”

“Alright, can you scout ahead? We’ll start moving in a few minutes.”

She nodded and bounded away. The two Lupans got up and followed her silently. Lucky moved to follow, but Kyven put a hand across his chest. “Stay with Strider.”

“Yes, Kyven,” he nodded, going back and pointing his finger in Strider’s unrepentant face. “I’ll get you for that! That hurt!”

“Children never learn,” Kyven said under his breath as he turned back to the Arcans. “We’ll be moving in a few minutes, and going to where there’s water and where we can rest a little more. So get ready,” he announced.

Kyven rode herd with the Arcans as they moved, not at a run but still faster than humans could easily walk, a ground-eating gait which Kyven had no trouble holding. He moved through the Arcans constantly, touching shoulders, asking if they were alright, answering questions, because he knew that he was dealing with highly volatile Arcans that needed almost constant reinforcement, couldn’t be allowed to forget for a second that a Shaman was among them and watching them. Some of them were probably obeying him because he was human, some because he was a Shaman, and others because he freed them, but so long as he kept them moving and prevented any fighting, he was going in the right direction. Lightfoot left a trail for him to follow, and he kept the coyote on that trail, allowing him to lead the disorganized mob of Arcans as they moved through a stand of sea pines left up to separate Cheston from the plantations and hamlets west. Lightfoot expertly maneuvered around open areas, so a walk that was only a minar long if they went straight was actually more like three. Eventually, however, they reached a small clearing that had a spur of the Cheston River running through it, a bypass just off the main river that split from it and rejoined, forming a small island just off the bank. Kyven had them all drink and sit down to rest, and also to gather themselves and enjoy a little time just being out of that hellhole. Kyven had to feed these Arcans, and that was high on his list of priorities; if he left them hungry, fights were sure to break out.

But first things first. He took the talker off Strider's saddle, which had been taken off the Equar so he could have a break, and hit the button, and waited for the reply. "Danvers," the general said after a short pause.

"General, I have the Pens Arcans," he answered.

"Excellent! How many did you rescue?"

"Between fighters and the Arcans they were going to feed to them, about a hundred and forty."

"Where are you?"

"West of Cheston, along the river," he answered. "They're in generally good shape, but I have about twelve who are too injured to move about on their own. Despite that, we can still move. Where do you want us?"

"Bring them to the army," he answered. "Turn due north after you get across the river, but make sure you're about five or six minars west of Cheston before you start north, they have patrols and scouts out. Kyven, if you cross any farms or plantations, do what you can to free the Arcans off them."

"Alright, that we can do. I need to feed these Arcans anyway, we can just plunder the farms for livestock."

"Don't let them go hungry," Danvers warned.

"I already planned for that, General," he answered, whistling loudly. The Lupans, who had been standing near Strider, trotted towards him along with the Equar. "Lightfoot! Lucky!" he boomed.

"That was loud, Kyven," Danvers complained.

He chuckled. "Sorry. I need to get moving, General. We'll be moving north in a little bit."

"I'll have scouts out looking for you."

"Alright. See you sometime tomorrow."

“Good luck out there, Shaman.”

“You too, General.”

His cat Arcans reached him just after Strider and the Lupans reached him, and he knelt down and cleared the ground and started drawing the riverbank. A couple of the fighting Arcans also gathered close as Lightfoot reached him and knelt. “Alright, we have our orders,” he told her. “Danvers wants us to bring the Arcans to the army. He told me to swing about six minars west of Cheston, cross the river, then turn north. He also told me to free any Arcan I come across from farms or hamlets. So, this is what we’re going to do,” he began, pointing at the crude map. “Lightfoot. I need a fording spot west of the river. Can you find either a ford or a bridge west of us?”

She nodded.

“Lucky, we need food before we start out. I don’t want the Arcans to move hungry. Saddle Strider, and since he’ll let you ride him, take him out and look for signs of deer or any plantation, village, or farm that’s close to this location, and try to get at least a rough idea of how many humans are on them so we know what we’re up against if we have to raid them for supplies. Do *not* let them see you.”

“I’ll be careful, Kyven,” he answered.

“There’s a ranch that way, Shaman,” one of the fighting Arcans announced, pointing southwest, a very large but very young canine, who had no scars on him. “I worked on the plantation beside it before I was sold, when I was a child. They sold me to the Pens not long ago.”

“Ranch? As in cattle?”

“Sheep, actually, but meat is meat,” the canine answered.

“Lucky, go find it.”

“I’m on my way,” he said, picking up Strider’s saddle and rushing over to the Equar.

“I’ll go with him, Shaman. I’ll know where it is when we get close enough for me to recognize the landmarks the humans talked about,” the canine offered.

Kyven nodded. “Be careful,” he cautioned. “Strider, don’t harass this one,” Kyven ordered, pointing at the canine.

“He’s savage?”

“No, he’s overly playful,” Kyven said dryly, which made the canine laugh.

“Is there a ford?” Lightfoot asked the canine.

“I can’t tell you that, I’d never been off my plantation before I was sold,” he said with a shrug.

“I’m going,” she said to Kyven.

“Be careful,” he said, which earned him a flat look and a snort in reply.

“What can we do to help, Shaman?” Ebony asked, who had limped over.

“Actually, if any of you feel up to it, you can check the woods around us. I’m sure the Chestoners are searching for us, so they may have scouts out. If you see a scout, do *not* kill him unless he’s coming right towards us. Run back to me and let me know, and I’ll go out and deal with him.”

“We can take a human, Shaman,” a large bear said indignantly.

“I’m sure you can, but your time to fight is over, my large friend,” Kyven told him simply. “I won’t make you fight anymore. I’ll defend this whole group by myself if I have to, because you have earned the right to have someone else protect you after everything you’ve been through.”

“I would fight anyway,” the bear said with simple dignity. “I will scout.”

“I’ll go,” another called.

“I will!” said another.

In about ten seconds, Kyven had nearly twenty fighting Arcans willing to scout, including Ebony, whom he rejected. He told them what to do and sent them out, warning them to report back to the group every ten minutes whether they saw someone or not, just in case the group needed to move so they wouldn't be left behind. He continued to move through the Arcans, with Ebony and both Lupans following him, reassuring them and gently reminding them that he was there, which kept them on good behavior. He spread quite a few blessings around and checked the bandages he'd put on a few of them, making sure they hadn't slipped. Lightfoot returned quickly, bounding up to him and noticing that the fighting Arcans gave her a curious look, but also respectful. She knelt down immediately and used her claw to dig a furrow in the grass. “We're here,” she said, and she traced a few curves in the grass, plowing up dirt. “There's a bridge here,” she said, tapping the end of her line. “About four minars upriver.”

“Good work,” he told her with a smile, patting her shoulder. “Go back there and watch it. The Chestoners might try to occupy it or set a scout there to see if we show up. If we don't show up by sunset, come find me.”

She nodded, then got up and bounded away. He went back to checking on the Arcans, spending about a half an hour making rounds and keeping things calm, until Lucky and the canine returned to the camp. “It's about five minars that way, Kyven,” Lucky said from the saddle, pointing southwest. “There's only like five humans on the ranch right now.”

“How many Arcans?”

“On the sheep ranch, none,” he answered. “But there's a cotton plantation right beside it, I saw a bunch of them working the fields. They looked like they were getting ready to go back to their houses for the night.”

“My old plantation,” the canine told him. “If you try to free those Arcans, they'll shoot at you, Shaman.”

“I’ll deal with that,” he said. “Alright, how long will it take to get there if we avoid the humans?”

“About two hours if we go slow. There was a bunch of farmland we crossed, and didn’t see anyone out on it and only about half of it had any crops or cotton on it.”

“Alright. Good work, you two,” Kyven said, patting the canine on the shoulder.

“I was called Jumper on the plantation, but they decided to call me Doomjaw at the Pens,” the canine said.

“Jumper is a much better name,” Kyven smiled. “Crops, you say? Was any of it edible?” he asked Lucky.

“Well, one field was full of little stunted shrub-like plants,” he answered. “The other, I dunno what it was. A bunch of green stalks with little leaves.”

“We’ll see when we get there. It might be edible.”

“I’d love to eat a plant again,” Jumper sighed.

“We’ll see.” He turned. “Alright, everyone get ready to go, we’re leaving as soon as the scouts all get back!”

As the group moved, it had scouts in front of it now. Five fighting Arcans were scouting just in front of the column as it made its way southwest, making sure they weren’t ambushed in the trees and checking out the open areas when they reached them to ensure there were no humans. They crossed the first farm field, which was left fallow, but the second one was indeed filled with a bunch of small, wide little plants that had no visible shoots, berries, or fruits. Kyven knelt down and pulled one up, and chuckled at what dangled among the roots. “Peanuts,” he said. “The plants are peanuts!” he shouted. “Pull them up as we go by if you like them, but don’t push each other and don’t stop, eat on the move! There’s plenty for everyone!”

The group ripped a few hundred peanut plants out of the field as it moved, and most of the Arcans nibbled on raw peanuts as they moved through a narrow strip of trees and to another farm. This was the other field Lucky mentioned, and it was filled with carrots. The group stripped quite a few of those as well, but that wasn't anywhere near enough to satisfy them.

After two hours of careful movement, they reached the ranch Lucky and Jumper had scouted. It wasn't that large, but there were about seventy sheep in a broad fenced pasture, with a simple house and two large barns at the extreme southeast side of the land. There were only two men watching the seventy sheep, one on a horse and the other sitting on an old log that looked to be a fallen tree they'd never removed. On the far side of the pasture was the cotton plantation. Kyven quickly formulated a plan for dealing with this, for this was clearly a family ranch and the five humans were the family that ran it. Kyven was basically about to ruin them, but there was no help for it. His Arcans needed food, and this was the closest and most easily available food.

"Wait here," Kyven told them from the fence. "Let me deal with those two humans, then feel free to go after the sheep. Just mind one thing," he said forcefully. "You will *share*. There's more than enough for all of us. If I see even one fight, I'm gonna come kick your butts. Understood?"

They nodded or replied.

"Give me one of the impact rods."

One was passed to him, and he checked it and realized that it, like most of its kind, had two settings, one to stun and one to kill. The rod he'd pulled on those men, out of the handler's sheath, had been set to kill, and those men died because of it. He set the rod to stun only, then kicked Lucky off Strider, mounted him, and jumped him over the fence, galloping towards the two shepherds. The two men watched him approach nervously, and as he got close he saw that neither man was armed. However, he didn't expect the reaction he got when he got there. One of the men looked at him, then gasped and went for the belt knife at his waist.

“It’s the man on the wanted poster!” the younger, dark-haired man blurted. “The murderer!”

The wanted posters...he’d forgotten about those. His face was stamped on a whole lot of them, but he’d thought they were all far north, near Avannar.

“Put the knife down, son,” Kyven warned as he drew his last posts knife.

“Leave this place, stranger,” the older man called, wielding his herding stick like a fighting staff.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he answered. “I’m afraid I have to take your sheep. I’m sorry I have to, but I have no choice.”

“You’re not takin’ our sheep, murderer!” the younger man screamed, lunging forward.

Kyven didn’t have to do a thing. Strider knocked the young man down with a quick strike of his foreleg, sending him sprawling, and Kyven raised his knife to be visible to the older man, in a throwing position. The man glared at him, then paled and took a few steps back as he looked past the Equar. Kyven looked back and realized that ten of the fighting Arcans were barreling at him, and they looked *furious*. They’d seen the young man attack him, and they were rushing to defend him!

Kyven quickly interposed Strider between the men and the Arcans, keeping an eye on the older man. “Stop!” Kyven shouted. “I’m alright!”

“He *attacked* you, Shaman!” the leader of them, which surprisingly was Ebony, said in outrage. How she ran so far, so fast, on an injured leg was beyond him.

“We’ll kill them!” another of them shouted in fury.

“Stand down!” Kyven barked. “I’m a big boy, I can take care of myself!” He turned towards the two men. The young one was just getting back to his feet, and the older one was gaping at him in shock, because

Kyven's eyes were now open to the spirits. Kyven was starting to understand what Clover complained about. The Arcans were *extremely* protective over the Shaman, and sometimes it made it hard to do their jobs because of so many well-meaning hands getting into their business. "Now go eat," he told them. "And keep an eye on the cotton plantation, the men over there may decide to interfere. If you see them coming, herd the Arcans towards the ranch house."

Ebony looked enraged, and she was all but shaking. But she nodded, a little stiffly, and the others followed her as she turned and started towards the now nervous sheep. Kyven whistled, then pointed at the sheep, and the other Arcans boiled out of the woods by the fence. The terrified bleats of the sheep were cut brutally short as the caged animals had nowhere to run from the hungry predators, and it only took a few minutes for every sheep to end up dead on the grass, already being eaten. The smaller Arcans came out slowly and timidly, but the fighting Arcans made no obvious moves when they sat by their carcass, and allowed them to share.

That was all Kyven needed to see.

"Alright, gentlemen, let's get you safely out of the way," Kyven told the two dumbfounded men. "We don't want anyone getting hurt, because I think you have an idea of what they'll do to you if you lay a finger on me."

The older man visibly paled, then he dropped his staff like it was a live snake.

Kyven herded the shepherds to their house, and was right when he figured it was a ranch family. The other three humans present were a mother and her two young children, who came out of the house to see what was going on as Kyven approached, but then ran back into the house when they realized the reality of the situation. Kyven kept an eye on them, and saw the female barricade herself and her two kids in a small root cellar. She was holding something in her hands, which Kyven guessed was a musket. "Go on in the house, and you'd better call out to your wife or she may shoot you. Stay in there until we're on our way, you'll be safe. Oh, and don't get any

bright ideas,” he warned. “If you shoot any of them, I’ll kill you. If you kill me, they will rip you apart and probably eat you, and you *know* they will.”

That threat held the family in check. The two men entered the house and called out to the woman, and then entered the cellar. Kyven then entered the house after them and found the trap door down to the cellar. He took water from a nearby bucket and tossed it on the door, then he used Shaman magic to flash freeze it before the water could drain away. He did that two more times until the ice on the door was over a finger thick, and he left them after taking the other two muskets they had in their house. The ice on the floor and door would effectively seal them in until it melted, and that wouldn’t be until this evening.

Kyven left the Arcans to eat as he took on the appearance of the older man, jumped the fence, and took care of the cotton plantation. His illusion allowed him to get close enough to the three startled workers, who were indeed gathering to do something about the Arcans overrunning their neighbor, with the idea to kill enough to scatter them and catch as many as they could to sell given how much Arcans were worth now. Kyven’s illusion let him get right among the men as he pretended to be in a panic, and once he was right up with them, he attacked. The first man went down to the impact rod before the other men could even comprehend what was going on, for Kyven still wore the face of their neighbor, and they seemed utterly stunned that he would attack them. But they recovered enough to fight back, and when they did that, Kyven resorted to his shadow powers; Kyven was no brawler when he didn’t have the upper hand, exploiting every advantage to win a fight in the easiest manner possible and with the least risk to himself, which was the way of his totem. He created a cloud of shadow around the entire area, and the men could no longer see him. The two men fired wildly, blindly with their muskets, one man grazing his friend with a musket ball just over his elbow, and Kyven laid into the nearest man with his impact rod, never getting in front of a man with a musket, and he was agile enough and had fast enough reflexes to evade the muskets and knock out the man holding it with the impact rod. When there was only one man left, Kyven struck his wrist with the rod, numbing his hand and making

him drop his musket, then he tripped him and drove him to the ground even as he dismissed the shadows. Kyven leaned down and grabbed him by his work shirt, his eyes glowing with a baleful green aura, then hauled him completely off the ground and held him aloft, his feet dangling nearly a rod off the ground. “How many more men run this plantation?” Kyven demanded, glaring up at the man with his eyes open to the spirits.

“Go to hell, you freak!”

“Then face your fear,” he said, meeting the man’s eyes and channeling the spell that made him see his greatest fear.

The man’s eyes widened, and his skin literally turned gray as his expression turned almost to wax, drooping down from his skull. He started trembling violently, his stare vacant, and then he shrieked, a blood-curdling scream that would make any child immediately hide under his bed. Kyven ended the spell and hoisted the man up even higher, and the man blinked and began to hyperventilate, even as he wet himself. “Answer my question or spend the rest of eternity staring *that* in the face,” he said in a cold, sinister tone.

“Just one!” he said in a terrified voice. “He’s working the other field! The rest went to go soldier in Cheston!”

“Any women? Any children?”

“At the plantation house! The master has a wife and two kids!”

A dark shape stalked up behind Kyven, and he glanced back to see Ebony. The bandage over her wound was dark with blood, no doubt opening it with that dash towards him earlier, and she looked over his shoulder and at the man he was holding. Her maw was also bloody from her meal. Kyven dropped the man unceremoniously, causing him to all but curl up on a fetal position, and he looked back at her. “Watch them,” he told her. “Actually, hold on, I have a better idea,” he said, advancing on the nearest cluster of slave Arcans, field workers who were all nude, staring at him with amazed eyes. He advanced on a little ferret that couldn’t be more than

four, a very cute little female, and smiled. “Let me have that, little one. You don’t need it now,” he told her, reaching out and blocking the crystal’s power, shunting it to himself without actively draining it, which caused it to stop working momentarily. He unlatched it and pulled it from her neck. She put her hands on her neck in awe, then threw herself against him, hugging him tightly.

“Shaman!” she squealed in delight. “Oh, bless me, Shaman, bless me!”

Kyven was basically swarmed by the slave Arcans, and they reached out to him, touching him, begged for his blessing. He held them off a little, long enough to take off their collars, and they followed him as he returned to the men. He knelt down and grabbed one of the unconscious ones by the hair, pulled his head up, and locked the collar around his neck. “How are these set?” he asked the slaves.

“We can’t leave the plantation,” one of them answered. “And they can punish us with them.”

“Are they set to punish you if you attack someone?”

“Only humans. They sometimes made us fight each other and they’d watch,” a raccoon answered.

“But they’re set to punish actively? If someone says a certain word?”

“Yes, Shaman.”

Kyven grinned ominously as he locked a collar on the other senseless man. “Good. Would one of you kindly stay with them, and if they wake up and misbehave, give them some of what they’ve given you?”

“You just made an old woman happy, Shaman,” one of the older Arcans said, a canine female with grizzled, gray fur under her chin. “I’ll do it.”

“Ebony, stay here and protect our honored mother,” Kyven ordered. “And be here to deal with these men if the collars don’t stop them.”

“Can I kill them?” she asked eagerly.

“If the collars won’t stop them, yes,” he answered. He picked up the musket that hadn’t been fired, and then took on the illusion of the man he’s frightened into insensibility with his magic. “Now let me go find that other man and deal with him, then we’ll plunder the plantation house for supplies, free the Arcans, and move on.”

It took him only about two minutes to find the last man, since he was riding a horse towards them as Kyven jogged towards the manor house. He rushed to dismount, and then he was on the ground unconscious when Kyven konked him with the impact rod, which had been hidden by the illusion. He took the man’s pistol, musket, and what looked like a controller of some sort for the collars, put a collar on him, threw him over his horse, and led it towards the plantation house. The master of the plantation, a middle-aged man wearing finery similar to Arthur Ledwell’s, stepped out onto the back porch as Kyven walked the horse into the house compound, with the house, a small smithy, two barns, and a small cotton mill for baling cotton at the far end. The Arcans lived in rude huts along the fringe of the compound on the east side, and his spirit sight showed a woman, a girl, a boy, and three female Arcans within the main house. “What’s going on, Smythe?” the man demanded. “We heard musket shots! Is Gerry alright?”

“Unconscious,” Kyven answered in Smythe’s voice. Kyven cocked the musket and then raised it on the man. “Now take that pistol out of your sash.”

“Smythe! What on earth are you doing?” the man demanded.

“I’m not Smythe,” he said in his own voice, then he dismissed the illusion. The man gasped and stared at him, then he paled when he looked at Kyven’s glowing eyes. “Now remove your pistol, sir. Slowly.”

He did so, carefully taking the pistol out of his sash, and setting it on the rail of the porch, cleverly keeping it within reach. The man’s eyes widened as he looked behind Kyven, but Kyven didn’t dare take his eyes off the man while that pistol was within his reach. Kyven turned his hand to

shadow and reached out with it, his hand stretching impossibly long on his wrist, then it wrapped around the pistol and pulled it back to him. He stuffed the pistol in his belt quickly, then he put his hand back on the barrel of the musket and dared glance behind him. The Lupans were there, padding up to him, until they flanked him on both sides. They both sat down sedately, staring up at the man with baleful amber eyes.

“I wondered where you two wandered off to,” he told them absently. “Now then, sir, let’s get you inside. I’m going to lock you and your family in the cellar so you won’t get in our way, and so long as you do nothing, you’ll be left healthy and well.”

“Just like my men?” he asked harshly.

“They’re all alive. They’ll have big headaches when they wake up, but they’re alive. But first things first,” Kyven said, lowering the musket and reaching for the saddle. The man looked to be pondering running into the house, but Kyven vaulted up over the rail of his porch so fast it startled him. Kyven snapped a collar around the man’s neck, and he looked suddenly outraged when he reached up with his hand and felt what was there.

“It will keep you out of trouble,” Kyven said mildly.

The wife was hysterical and the girl crying, but the teenage boy glared daggers at Kyven when he invaded their house, rounded them up, and put collars on all of them. He had them handy because the three house servants had collars on. He had the servants drag the man off the horse into the kitchen, where the door to the cellar was located. They dumped him onto the ground, two cat Arcans and a mouse, all three of them nude; in fact, there wasn’t a dressed Arcan anywhere on the plantation, which was unusual for Cheston. “Put your outrage back in your pants, boy,” Kyven told the teenager in a steady voice, dryly amused by his hateful stare. “Be thankful I only kill when I have no choice, else you’d be dead.”

“Lying bastard,” the boy spat.

“Sirra, Dauro!” Kyven called. The boy’s eyes went wild when two massive, pony-sized canines padded in through the door, taking up a significant amount of kitchen as they stood near to him. “My two friends will make sure you don’t get any bright ideas. If you come back up these stairs without me, they’ll kill you. That’s your one and only warning, people. Now, down the stairs, all of you.”

Kyven went down into the cellar behind them, and as they stood in a nervous group in the middle, Kyven cast about with his eyes, making sure they had no crystals or alchemical devices down here, nothing they could use to call for help. He didn’t care if they had muskets, because there were no windows down here and thus they had no way to shoot at anyone except each other. Kyven left them there and dragged the unconscious man down and dumped him on the floor. “You’ll get the other men down here when I drag them over,” he told them. “You just stay down here and stay out of the way. At sunset, you’re welcome to leave the cellar.”

“What are you going to do?” the wife asked in a trembling voice.

“Free your Arcans, take every weapon we can find, take all the food we can find, and then leave,” he answered immediately.

“You’re a rebel!”

“I’m a Shaman,” he answered, staring at her with his glowing eyes.

“Impossible! Only Arcans are tainted by the devil!” she gasped.

“Get ready to rewrite your theology, lady,” Kyven said dryly, raising a hand and sending an arc of electricity along his fingers, which made her gasp and flinch. “I won’t be the only human Shaman you see. The spirits have decided that the human race needs Shaman, and so here I am. And there will be more after me,” he declared simply.

Kyven left them in the cellar, jamming a chair against the door to keep them in there temporarily. The three house Arcans gazed at him in adulation, then the mouse stepped up to him. “Shaman, will you bless me?” she asked in a meek voice.

“Of course, little one,” he smiled, putting his hand on her shoulder and giving her the ritual benediction. He blessed the other two, then put his hands on each of the cat’s shoulders. “Now listen. I know you three know everything there is to know about this house,” he said, to which they nodded. “I want you to gather up every weapon and alchemical device in this house you know about and put them out on the back porch. You also need to gather up all the food. Now, since this is a cotton plantation, where do they keep the sling pouches for harvest time?”

“In the barn, Shaman,” one of the cats answered.

“Good. You, go find the weapons,” he said, looking at the gray tabby. “You start collecting the food,” he told the mouse. “You go get the slings and pile them on the back porch so we can carry the food away,” he told the brown and red spotted cat. “I’ll send some Arcans to help you as soon as I can. When they get here, tell them what to do, okay?”

“Yes, Shaman!” they said enthusiastically, and they rushed off to do their jobs.

Kyven had the men dragged to the plantation and tossed in the cellar, and they got to work. Kyven first sealed the door with ice as he had done with the sheep ranchers, then he went out around the plantation and gathered up all the Arcans, freed them, and told them that they would be coming with his rag-tag band as it sought to join the main army. He gathered them up at the main house and put them to work as the fighting Arcans both helped and also kept watch, protecting the host as it systematically stripped the plantation. Kyven took everything, and in scorched earth tactics, what he could not use but could be used against his group, he destroyed. The wagons were the perfect example of that. He couldn’t take the wagons, but those wagons might be used in the war effort against the Arcans, so he broke all the wheels on both wagons and took the horses. He used every saddle in the barn, but four of the horses were purely meant to draw wagons, so he was four saddles short. That wasn’t a real problem, though. The injured Arcans capable of riding were put on the horses so the fighting Arcans didn’t have to carry them, but it still left him

with six Arcans that had to be carried. One of the plantation field Arcans came up with an idea of putting them in slings carried by the draft horses, and that idea worked fairly well. They fashioned slings out of canvas and put one on each side of a draft horse, then lashed them down so they weren't jostled all over the place. They were like little hammocks, and the Arcan that built them using some sticks and rope had done a good job.

But there was also the matter of sacking the plantation. Kyven had the Arcans strip it of virtually everything, even the clothes of the children, which were packed into slings that would be carried by the Arcans. They looted six muskets, three pistols, no alchemical weapons, and several utility alchemical devices such as spotlights and firestarters. Kyven handed out the weapons mainly to the plantation Arcans, the smaller ones that might need a weapon, but he made sure to fashion a sheath for the impact rod and keep it on his hip. The weapon seemed to suit him, since he could use it either lethally or non-lethally, and it didn't take much training to whack someone with a stick. Kyven was no fencer, no fighter, and the ease of use of the weapon was perfect for him.

He took stock after the looting was done. He'd freed 31 Arcans from the plantation, which swelled the ranks of his little army significantly. All of them were going to travel with him, stay with the Shaman, but Kyven did notice that about a dozen of the fighting Arcans had slunk off during the looting, taking what they could get and running away. Kyven didn't stop them, nor did he have any anger towards them. That was their choice, and he would allow them to make it. It still left him with about 80 fighting Arcans, not including the injured, and nearly 80 smaller Arcans, both the plantation workers and those that were fated to be fed to the fighters. His group had looted enough foodstuffs to last his group for about a day, and that was all they'd need to reach the army. He checked the injured as they were loaded into the slings, helped the others mount, and then knelt down and peeled back the makeshift bandage on Ebony's leg. She allowed him to do so, hissing slightly under her breath as the bandage pulled away some scabbing. "I'd really rather you ride, Ebony," he told her as he made sure

the wounds had more or less stopped bleeding after she reopened them, then tied the remains of his waistcoat back around her leg.

“I will walk, Shaman,” she told him simply. “I will walk with you.”

He gave her a look. “I think I’ve proved that I don’t need a nanny, Ebony. I may not be as good at fighting as you and the others, but I cheat quite a lot.”

She gave him a completely unashamed look. “I won’t let *anyone* touch you, Shaman,” she declared adamantly.

Kyven reached out with one hand and deliberately poked his finger into his other forearm. “I do believe you have just failed, Ebony,” he said dryly. She gave him a startled look, then actually laughed.

“You meant it when you said you cheat.”

“Outrageously,” he drawled, standing up.

Leading Strider and with Lucky again walking, and with Ebony right beside him, Kyven started them out. Fighters scouted ahead as he showed them which way to go, and more fighters watched their backtrail for pursuit, protecting the column as it moved. Kyven allowed Lucky and Strider to lead, and he again roamed through the host, allaying fears, keeping the fighting Arcans calm and reassured, distributing blessings almost every time he turned around, often blessing the same Arcan three or four times. It took them nearly an hour to get to the bridge, where he had them come to a stop as he called Lightfoot in. She bounded up and rose up on her feet, then leaned forward and nuzzled him briefly. “Clear,” she told him simply.

“Good work,” he told her, patting her on the shoulder. “Go help the scouts. I’m sure they need to learn the trick of moving quietly, and I know you know the way to the army.”

She gave him a scathing look to told him she believed just that.

They picked up the pace after they got across the bridge, for Lightfoot knew where they were going and guided the column. She left signs for

Lucky and Lucky followed them, and the massive Equar was the undeniable leader of the disorganized pack of moving Arcans, many of them weighed down by their cotton picker slings laden with food and supplies for the army. Kyven had Lightfoot avoid the human settlements and instead try to lead them to and through isolated plantations and farmsteads, which caused their population to expand as they moved. Kyven sacked three more farms and two more plantations as they moved, farms that were critically undermanned because many of the hands were in Cheston to be part of the army, and that let Kyven and his Arcans more or less just march in and take over. Kyven was careful not to kill anyone, taking over every farm as he took over the first one, just riding in using illusions and distracting the hands long enough to ambush them at close range. Kyven had to actually start leaving things behind, though he denied them to the enemy by destroying them, and every farm they left had a bonfire burning out in a field where food, supplies, and possible resources that might be confiscated by the Chestoners to use against the Arcans was destroyed.

Those fires more or less led the response right to his mob of Arcans. At sunset, as they rested, The spotted cat bounded in with two others and sought him out. “There’s a bunch of humans on horses coming up behind us, Shaman,” he reported.

“Are they armed?”

“I think so. I didn’t get a good look.”

Kyven stood up from checking the nasty wounds on the side of a male bear, one of his injured. “Alright, good work, little brother. Stay here, and make sure you keep a very tight rein on all the horses. They’re going to be very scared in just a few minutes.”

“You’re going to go fight them *alone*?” the cat gasped.

“I’m not going to fight them at all. And they’re not going to fight either if they’re chasing after their horses.”

“How are you going to do that, Shaman?” Ebony asked.

“Magic,” he said with a malicious smile. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

Moving with swiftness and grace that looked more Arcan than human, Kyven ghosted back behind them, towards the road they’d just crossed not long ago. He could hear the men after pausing to listen, about a half a minar away from the sound of it, the sound of trotting horses and the jingle of spurs and metal and the slap of leather on horseflesh. There were certainly a lot of them to be making that much noise, an expedition to corral the escaped Arcans that they knew were nearby, since they’d left a trail of burning pyres behind them to mark their path.

This would work. This was a forested area between plantations, about two hundred rods of woods that marked the boundary between the holdings of two different families, which weren’t uncommon through most of the southern and central marches of Noraam. Kyven dredged his memory and recalled an image, and then worked meticulously to build that image in his mind in exacting, ultimate detail. This illusion had to be *perfect*, it had to have so much substance that it would terrify the horses, and that meant that he had to build it and channel it with absolute perfection. When he absolutely every single detail in his mind, he built that image into a spell and beseeched the fox for her blessing, which she granted with sadistic approval. She certainly approved of this trick, since it was perfectly within her nature.

Behind him, a truly monstrous figure slowly swirled into view, a huge, shaggy-furred monstrosity with a narrow head and claws as long as a man’s leg on its forepaws, whose back topped off nearly fifteen rods off the ground. It had two white streaks running side by side down its broad back, and a large, bushy tail where those two white streaks merged to a single white band. Glowing red eyes glared out from that small head, and rows of deadly teeth were visible when it opened its huge mouth. It was a Wolveran, the very image of the one Kyven had seen, and it was one of the most feared and ferocious monsters in all of Noraam. The Arcans stayed far away from them, and even the humans on this side of the Smoke Mountains knew about these savage marauders, for they were known to cross the mountains

and attack settlements. They were vicious, single-minded ravagers so deadly that no one in their right minds stayed within a minar of one.

The illusion was *perfect*. It was so perfect, it even had a smell, a musky, strong odor that assaulted Kyven's nose, a smell he knew personally and was able to weave into this illusion, and a smell that might panic the horses in his group if they caught it on the breeze. "Alright, boy, let's go scare the shit out of the Chestoners," he told the illusion. He steeled himself and aligned his mind to accept what he saw in front of himself as real, as totally real, then he reached out and grabbed a shaggy tuft of its fur.

Then, methodically, he climbed up on top of his illusion, spreading his legs wide across its broad back and leaning down. He got a firm grip in its shaggy fur, then kicked the illusion with his feet.

The Wolveran illusion started shuffling forward, but doing it quietly, making almost no noise, but leaving behind very *real* footprints. So complete was the illusion, so detailed, so instilled with substance, that it was solid to the touch and had real weight. The Wolveran shambled along the wood-flanked road on quiet feet, as the sound of the army got louder and louder, then it hunkered down at the start of a turn in the road and waited.

When the first of the horses appeared coming around the bend, two scouts searching for signs of the army as their horses walked forward slowly, the men stood no chance. While maintaining his illusion, Kyven exhausted himself almost completely by blasting the men and their horses with killing cold, killing them instantly and literally freezing the horses in mid-stride. One of them toppled over sideways, its foreleg breaking off its frozen body and the rider atop it shattering like a statue, while the other horse shuddered, wobbled slightly, and then came to an eerie, silent rest to become a living statue of frozen flesh. Kyven urged the illusion forward, past the dead scouts, then urged it to a shambling trot. When the main body of the Cheston men came out of the twilight gloom, about a hundred of them all mounted and carrying muskets, riding in two columns with three men out front, who had to be the commanders. Kyven had his illusion surge

forward and give that shrieking cry which was undoubtedly a Wolveran, a growling, throaty cry that any man with any experience in the forest knew and feared. The men sawed their reins to stop their horses, and the men in front's eyes widened when a Wolveran burst out of the darkening trees ahead, charging them at full bore!

Few men could stand up in the face of that kind of pure terror, for the Wolveran's glowing red eyes bored into any man who dared look into them, promising agonizing death. They were the eyes of pure evil, and no man could hold that gaze for long. The ground under the horse's hooves literally shook as the immense monster charged them with a low, shuffling galloping gait, its short legs rolling under it yet still barreling at them with surprising speed. The men reacted as Kyven expected. The horses also reacted as he expected. The men were indecisive and fearful, but the horses started shying and prancing, sensing a deadly predator nearby, feeling the ground shake under them, but not quite close enough for them to make out in the gloom yet.

"Wolveran!" one of the men screamed in fear, and that just about did it. Kyven had the illusion shriek again just as the commander tried to have his men open fire, drowning out his command as the man drew his own musket. The commander leveled it at the illusion, and to his credit, he fired. The musket ball disappeared into the shaggy expanse of the Wolveran's fur, and though it passed through the illusion harmlessly, the man couldn't tell that, could only see that his shot didn't even make the monster flinch. Kyven had the illusion open its maw to show them its deadly teeth, some longer than a man's hand and sporting fangs that could completely impale a man. The illusion then got close enough for the horses to see and smell, and that caused them to panic. Horses had the sense not to be on the business end of a Wolveran's jaws. Several more men sent wild, disorganized shots towards the illusion, further panicking the horses with the loud explosions, and then they all scattered in every direction.

The commander stared down the maw of the Wolveran, then turned his panicked horse at the last instant and scrambled out of the way. He gurgled and fell out of his saddle, however, when Kyven's last posts knife sank into

his neck, severing his artery. Blood boiled out of the wound in spurts as he stiffened and then toppled out of the saddle. He then raised his pistol and shot at one of the other men that were in the lead, but he missed. The men didn't seem to care about the man on the Wolveran's back, attacking them, because all their attention was taken up by the Wolveran. His Wolveran was scattering the now terrified men and their panicked horses as it charged into the throng of them, screeching and growling and snapping its huge jaws at anything that was even remotely close. Some men tried to level their muskets at the illusion, but the panicked horses made it impossible for them to line up a shot. Many horses bucked off their riders and raced away in any direction that did not take it closer to the Wolveran, and only about half of those horses had riders. The men on the ground scrambled to their feet and ran away, completely disorganized and terrified despite the shouting of one of the men in front, trying to rally the men to fight the monster. But Kyven had approached them in the darkness and used their surprise to then terrorize them into a complete breakdown of discipline.

Where Kyven had missed with the pistol, he didn't miss with Shaman magic. It pretty much well completely exhausted him after the use of magic over the day and the demanding attack he had unleashed against the scouts, but he channeled lightning against the man trying to get control of the men, lightning that literally made his head explode in a shower of bone and gore. He had to grit his teeth to maintain the illusion of the Wolveran, his blood burning and pounding in his ears from his exhaustion, but that explosion and the sudden smell of blood in the air finished off the horses. The few that the men were keeping under control turned and bolted, completely panicked, and those men that managed to stay in their saddles could only hang on for dear life. The men who had been unseated scattered into the farmland, trampling cotton plants in their mad dash to get away from the savage monstrosity. Kyven had the Wolveran rise up on its hind legs and bellow loudly, which allowed him to slide off its back, then he quietly went about gathering up the muskets the men had dropped as he had his Wolveran appear to be eating the dead, hunched over their corpses as he tired himself even further by supplying the illusory sounds of bones cracking and being crushed as the Wolveran seemed to eat. Once he

gathered up the sixteen muskets that had been thrown down or lost in the rout, he covered himself with shadow to be invisible in the deepening night and held the illusion long enough to get back into the trees. The Wolveran then simply vanished without a sound, but there were no more men anywhere nearby to take notice of it. A few men *did* notice it, but they were on foot and the rest of their men were too scattered to even try to get back together

The Arcans were worried and nervous when Kyven jogged wearily back to them, his face gray and sweating profusely, carrying so many muskets he could barely keep them under control in his trembling arms. The Arcans rushed forth, taking the muskets, and Ebony put her arm around him and literally held him up. "I'm alright," he said. "I just wore myself out faster than I expected, that's all. Shaman magic is very demanding to use."

"Did it work?" Lightfoot asked as she reached him.

He nodded. "They're scattered behind us, it's going to take them a long time to get their men and horses back together and organized, especially since I killed their commanders."

"How?" she asked.

"I sent a Wolveran after them," he said with a wolfish smile. "I killed the commanders in the confusion."

Lightfoot laughed. "Effective."

"I'm going to have to ride now, I'm too tired to walk," he said to them. "I'm sorry."

"Never apologize to us, Shaman," Ebony declared, literally picking him up. "I'll carry you to your big horse." And she did just that, limping along with him cradled in her arms. He was too tired to argue that she was injured and shouldn't be carrying him, but this wolf was a very determined female.

"I'll need some food," he said. "Raw meat. It will help me recover."

“I’ll make sure you get it,” she told him, reaching Strider. She then quite literally pushed him up and into the saddle by his rump, and she was tall enough to do it. She then stood right by the Equar and told one of the smaller Arcans from one of the plantations to bring raw meat for the Shaman.

Kyven waited for the food to arrive and took it with a grateful nod, Ebony handing it up to him, and then Lightfoot took over, getting them ready to move.

They moved much faster at night, and quickly left the soldier men far behind them. Arcans could see at night just effectively as a human could in the daylight, and they used the cover of darkness to literally march right through hamlets and farms they would have avoided. They also freed even more Arcans as they moved, moving with surprising quiet despite there being so many of them as they moved onto farms and ranches and plantations, finding the Arcans, and Kyven would wearily get down off the Equar and drain their collars and fold them into the host. No farm they crossed even bothered to put out any guards or watchers, so utterly confident they were in the collars, that or the fact that the farms were currently undermanned with their hands being in Cheston to help defend it. There were a couple of close calls, but nothing that required his direct intervention. Lightfoot led them unerringly, the cat almost having a sixth sense that led her right to the army, the same way she could find him. By midnight, Lightfoot had encountered the vanguard of the army’s scouts, and it had been an amicable meeting. Soon afterward, Clover, Danvers, and several others arrived, Danvers in nothing but a pair of breeches as he was roused out of bed. Kyven slid out of the saddle and embraced Clover fondly. “My brother,” she said, licking him exuberantly on the cheek. “I am so glad to see you! You look awful.”

He laughed. “I’m just exhausted, Clover,” he answered her. “I have about three hundred Arcans here, General. Some want to fight, some don’t.”

“We’ll get them all sorted out, Kyven,” he smiled.

“Ebony, this is Clover, a sister Shaman. Clover, this is Ebony. She and a few others need your help,” he finished, pointing at her bandage even as Clover looked closely at her blood red left eye.

“I’ll see to them at once, my brother,” she said, licking him one more time and then releasing him. “Now, let us see to your eye and this leg of yours, my large sister,” she said, kneeling down and starting to work on the knots of the bandage. “General, could you have our people find the wounded and bring them to me, please?”

“Of course, my dear,” Danvers smiled. Ebony, however, wasn’t giving Danvers a very pleasant look.

“He’s a friend, Ebony,” Kyven said warningly. “If you trust me, then trust him.”

She didn’t look too happy to hear that, but she did nod. “Will you bless me, Shaman?” she asked Clover.

“Of course I will, but after we see to your leg,” she answered, getting the bandage untied. She winced slightly when she saw the ugly wound. “You’ve been *walking* on this leg?” she said incredulously, turning an accusing stare to Kyven.

“Hey, she’s bigger than me, it’s not like I could make her stop,” he protested.

Clover laughed. “Yes, I think I can see that,” she said as she looked up and took notice of Ebony’s adamant expression. “Dear girl, there is such a thing as being *too* tenacious,” she chided the wolf as she put her hand to the ugly gashes on Ebony’s leg. “Be lucky I was close, for had you kept walking on this leg, you would have crippled yourself,” she declared as Kyven felt her start working her healing magic.

Kyven left the Arcans for Clover and Danvers to sort through, for he was bone weary and could barely keep his eyes open. However, he wanted the fighting Arcans to be able to see him to keep them calm and reassured, so he decided to just sit down in the field. Sirra and Dauro padded in from

the woods and walked around him, then laid down beside him, the big male literally laying down against Kyven's back. Sirra's huge head settled into his lap, a very open declaration of where the Lupans' loyalties lay. The feel of their warmth near and against him and their protective closeness making him feel secure overwhelmed his desire to see to the dispensation of the Arcans. He sagged back against Dauro's flank, and almost immediately fell asleep.

It was the sun that woke him up, and to his surprise, he was right where he'd been when he fell asleep. He was still leaning against Dauro, but now the Lupan was laying his side and Kyven was propped up against his narrow chest, his head rising and falling with the breaths of the Lupan. Sirra was curled up all but around him, surrounding him completely with Lupan, her head laying beside Dauro's. His legs were partially under Sirra, but she wasn't crushing them because his legs were under her narrow midsection, not her ribs. He felt a little stiff, and as usual after sleeping off magical exhaustion, he was ravenously hungry, a hunger that instilled a nearly phobic fear in him, a reflex from his time in the Ledwell cage. The camp bustled all around him, and to his surprise, or maybe not, Ebony and two other of the fighting Arcans were sitting calmly not ten paces away, watching him. Ebony had some sort of attachment to him because he rescued her, and he saw that she shared that sentiment with the coyote he'd had lead the group and the spotted cat he'd calmed down in the cell.

"Sirra," he called groggily, pushing at her. "Sirra, let me up." She opened her glowing amber eyes and regarded him calmly, then rolled over on her back, all four paws up in the air and her tail wagging. Kyven laughed despite himself and scrubbed her fur on her belly fondly, then patted her ribs as he stood up. "You big puppy," he accused as Ebony stood up. Her leg was healed, and what was more important, he could see that her left eye was no longer filled with blood. He stepped over to them and raised a slightly trembling hand up to her face, cupping her left cheek. "Did she save your vision?" he asked.

She nodded. “Shaman Clover healed me,” she told him. “Are you alright?”

“Weak and starving, but that’s not unusual given how much I exhausted myself. Take me to some food. Now.”

“Clover wants to know—“

“*Now*,” he cut her off. “Clover will understand, and she’ll wait.”

Ebony and the others led him to where they were keeping the stores, and he tore into the raw venison they offered him, sitting on a box they’d had on a pack horse. He wolfed down more than what seemed a man could eat so fast he barely chewed it, but the raw meat did its work, flushing new strength through depleted muscles and flushing energy through him once again. The raw meat replaced what he burned away using his magic, leaving only a feeling of weariness that he knew would fade soon. The Arcans waited for him to eat, and he had to chuckle ruefully as he stood up. “I’m not going to disappear if you look away, you three,” he accused.

Ebony just looked right at him. “You are my Shaman,” she declared.

“They say there’s going to be a war,” the cat said. “You need someone to watch your back, just like you told that bull. Another pair of eyes in hostile territory.”

“And we’ll be those eyes,” the coyote declared adamantly. “We already agreed. We will stay with you, Shaman. You are our Shaman, and we are your Arcans.”

“To the end,” Ebony declared with dignity. “You saved my life, and now I will repay you by protecting yours.”

“I would have died in that cell if not for you, Shaman,” the cat agreed.

“You saved us all,” the coyote added, putting a hand on the shoulders of the other two. “And now our lives will be devoted to protecting yours, just as Ebony said.”

“I don’t need protection, my friends. And to be honest, you couldn’t follow me half the places I go. Me being human gives me the ability to move through the human world unrestricted, and there are times when I just can’t have Arcans with me.”

“But when you *can* have us with you, we will be there,” the coyote stated. “We talked to Clover. We understand what you are, and what you can do. We know you do things so dangerous nobody else will even attempt them, and you do them without fear. We won’t disgrace ourselves by failing to be half as brave as you, Shaman. When you need us, we will be there.”

“I do them with plenty of fear,” he chuckled ruefully. “But I do them because nobody else can. I’m a totem Shaman, friends. That means that I have certain advantages that other Shaman don’t have, and my particular area of expertise is illusion.”

“Still, we will be your claws and fangs, Shaman,” the cat said quietly. “Lightfoot said you can’t fight for yourself. We will do your fighting for you.”

“I can fight well enough,” he retorted, a touch indignantly. “Lightfoot just thinks I’m helpless because she can kick my ass. Well, she can kick *anyone’s* ass, so that’s an unfair determination.”

Ebony actually laughed. “I’m afraid of that little cat,” she admitted. “There’s just something...something about her. I don’t ever want to have to fight her.”

“Then you know exactly what I’m talking about,” he said with a snort, turning from them. “Now show me where Clover is.”

The three of them led him through the camp, all but daring anyone to get in their way as they headed for a large tent near the center of the encampment. “Shaman,” the coyote said tentatively. “We would ask something of you.”

“I think you’re imposing a lot more than asking,” he noted.

The coyote laughed. “We don’t want to carry the names they forced on us in the Pens,” he explained. “You gave Ebony her name. Would you give us ones too?”

“Fine. You’re cuddlewuggums, and you’re smooshy-yumyums.”

The two males almost fell down as they skidded to a stop, giving him wild looks. Ebony burst out into helpless laughter. “Be careful what you ask for. You may get it,” Kyven told them mildly as he walked past them, then they too began to laugh, a bit ruefully.

Clover was in the tent, along with Danvers, Lightfoot, and most of his command staff. They were clustered around a folding table that held a map of Cheston on it, in great detail, as well as fortifications and counters that represented enemy forces. They stopped and looked to him when he entered, and Clover came over and licked him fondly on the cheek. “Feeling better?” she asked.

“Some,” he answered. “Plans?”

“Going over them, yes,” Danvers answered. “And since you’re here, we can ask you about some of them.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“The question is, what do you think you can do?”

“Well, I can disable those tower cannons,” he said, coming up to the table and touching the fortress tower that held one of the city’s sea cannons, which was now pointing inland. “I can get both of them, and maybe some of the other artillery they have out there.”

“Good,” Danvers said. “the main thing I would want you to do, though, is make sure they have no alchemical death machines. I don’t want to send a column of men and Arcans into a black cloud and listen to them die.”

“Oh! Speaking of death machines,” he said, reaching for the pouch still around his waist. He untied it and put it on the map, and carefully unfolded the sash. Danvers’ eyes widened when he saw the black crystals inside. “I

took this out of the death machine in the Pens,” he said. “I had to shatter the crystal just in case they caught me, so they couldn’t put it back in, but I think it’ll actually be more useful like this than as one crystal.”

“It will indeed!” he said immediately. “We can load the slivers into pistols, and I’m sure we can find a use for the larger pieces.” Kyven carefully folded it back into a pouch, and Danvers had a page take it to the weapons quartermaster. The young man held the folded sash well away from his body as if it were a live snake.

That was actually a very wise and healthy reaction, given what he was holding.

“Alright, so you think you can disable the tower cannons, and maybe some of the artillery they have scattered through the city?” Danvers asked.

“Easily,” he shrugged.

“Good. We’ll work with that, then,” he declared, pointing at the map. “Let me show you what we intend to do.

“We’re going to attack around midnight tonight,” he began, pointing at the southwest section of the city. “Here. You said this gate is the most weakly defended, and its fortifications are almost ramshackle, so that’s where we’re going to hit them. I’m sending in riflemen first who will get close enough to fire on the walls but out of musket range and sweep the walls around the gate clear. Then I’m going to send in some cavalry and some Arcans to take the gate, which shouldn’t be that hard for them because I already have volunteer Arcans who are willing to scale the gate and open it from the inside. Once we have it open, they switch to different tasks,” he said, tracing his hand up the street behind the gate. “First, they’ll sweep the walls from the inside to clear off the musketmen our riflemen missed and allow our forces to get in with a minimum of gunfire slowing them down, and secondly, they’re to occupy these houses here, here, and here, to prevent any kind of organized response from coming down the streets as our forces get inside and muster by the gate for the next phase. You said they haven’t blocked any streets inside, and while that may allow them to

move their troops anywhere in the city, they're going to find that it also lets *us* move unfettered through the city," he said with a grim smile. "We'll take these positions here and hold them while the main force of the army moves in. Once we're in position, we're going to go this way with the invading force," he said, tracing a street that would take them towards the ocean, but in a curving arc, leading right to the front gates of the city's sea fort. "The key to Cheston is Fort Summer. If I can breach the fort and get my men inside, then keep *them* from doing the same thing to us, then we have them. We'll have the fort, and can basically shell Cheston at our leisure and there's not a damn thing they can do about it. And this is where you come in, Kyven."

"I can get inside and open the main gate," he said before Danvers could ask him.

"Excellent. Now, while we're doing that, there's going to be a diversionary force here," he said, pointing to a section of the north wall. "They'll have our cannons, and they'll start shelling the north wall a little bit after sunset while we move around the city, then just before we attack the southwest gate, they'll form up as if we're about to attack, because by then they should have a wide hole blown through their wall. That should draw the majority of the defense to that point, which will give us the opportunity to hit them from behind. Once we breach the fort, these forces will retreat and take up positions here, here, and here, to keep the Chestoners pinned inside the city. Those are all high ground, ridge tops, and we can quickly fortify those positions. The Chestoners will take unacceptable losses trying to storm those ridges, and they'll be forced to try when we move the four cannons we have up to those ridges and start bombarding the city from both the inside *and* the outside. Two hundred men with Briton rifles can hold any of those ridges against a thousand men with muskets. With us holding both their fort and the high ground outside, and with us blowing the hell out of their city one cannonball at a time, they'll have few if any options. They should surrender after they see we have them squeezed in a vice."

It was a strange plan, but Kyven could see the devious possibilities of it, where Danvers utilized the unconventional assets at his disposal, mainly his highly mobile and night-sighted Arcans and Kyven's unique abilities. Instead of laying siege to the entire town, as they would expect, or attack the entire town and force the Chestoners to surrender in a bloody battle whose outcome was uncertain, Danvers' idea of storming the fort and then barricading themselves inside it was unconventional, and in its own way, brilliant. They'd never expect such a daring maneuver, and with Kyven there to deal with the front gate and just let them in, well, they'd also never see it coming. Their job was to take Cheston, but Danvers was going to do it from the *inside*. If they held the fort, and they kept enough men outside the city to keep them penned in the walls, then the forces of Cheston would be trapped between two armies...armies with cannons that would slowly yet inexorably pound Cheston into rubble. And there wouldn't be a damn thing they could do about it.

"So, you need me to disable the tower cannons only temporarily," Kyven reasoned, looking at the map. "And I'd need to disable the artillery here, here, and here *permanently*, so they can't bombard the fort once we take it."

"That would be best," Danvers nodded. "Though once we have the fort, we can attack those positions ourselves. So, those positions are just a bonus, Kyven. If you can take them out, good. If not, don't worry about it. The tower cannons aren't the only cannons in the fort, but the Chestoners will have a hard time using them against us along the path I intend to use. It keeps buildings between us and them the entire way there, and they can't hit what they can't see. The tower cannons are the main ones that *could* attack us since they have such a high vantage point, so those are the ones we need removed from the battle."

"Alright, that works," he nodded. "Your plan is a little tricky, but if it works, we'll beat the piss out of them."

"I'll take that as a complement, Shaman," Danvers chuckled, but then his expression became serious. "This is going to be very dangerous for you,

Kyven. For us too, for that matter. Opening that front gate will take something spectacular, since they'll have a lot of men there. We'll have to fight our way in once we get past the gate, but we'll be able to do it."

"Men are easy to fool if they're being told what to do by someone they trust, General," he said calmly. "I'll have to leave early today to get inside and study the interior and come up with a plan, but if you want that gate open, I'll make sure it's open. I'll even do what I can to get the men out of the courtyard so you don't have to fight for every rod of courtyard once our men start coming through the gate."

"I'll take all the help I can get, Shaman," Danvers said seriously. "This plan is risky, but the rewards are worth the risk. If we can take the fort, they'll be helpless."

"It's worth a shot," Kyven agreed. "After all, if things go bad, I can always just sneak away. So it's your ass that's on the line here, General, not mine."

Danvers gave him a look, then laughed loud and long.

Chapter 13

Alright, so this wasn't going to be as easy as he hoped.

They were getting smarter. The Loreguard, knowing that it was him that had attacked the Pens and freed the Arcans there, had a plan to deal with what they knew about him, and he had to admit, it was clever. Simply put, they allowed no man to move about in less than a group of four. A man had to keep his other three companions in sight at all times, even when they relieved themselves, moving in a unified group. Any man caught out alone was treated as the Shaman, and was locked in the brig until they were absolutely sure it wasn't him. Their thinking was that to replace any one man, Kyven had to kill the other three, and that would prevent him from being able to replace a soldier and use him to get close to an officer or commander. The ruckus of the fight would defeat the purpose of being able to quietly take someone else's identity and use it against the others. The officers had even more extravagant protections, even a lowly Lieutenant moving around with an escort of six men, and the higher officers having even more guards who literally would not get out of visual sight of the officer. The commander of Fort Summer and the general of the Loreguard forces had dozens of men around them, watching them at all times, to ensure Kyven didn't get to their leaders and replace them to lead them astray, as he had done in Rallan.

That made it more challenging, but that didn't mean that their idea had holes. For one, any Loreguard soldier caught alone was taken to Fort Summer and put in the brig, which was where Kyven wanted to go. For another, the Loreguard thought he could only take someone else's identity, not create three illusions to escort him as he moved to seem to be a four man squad. For that matter, they felt that all he could do was copy the appearance of another man and turn invisible in the darkness. They had no inkling of just what he was capable of doing.

He moved without challenge through the streets of Cheston, where every man paused and tipped his hat or nodded to him, because he wasn't hiding under the illusion of a Loreguard or Cheston Militia officer, he was hiding under the illusion of a comely young girl wearing a slightly revealing white dress and carrying a parasol. The illusion's hair was a vibrant blond and done in a multitude of small curls, something of a fashion trend among Cheston aristocracy, with an ivory comb holding it all together to make the hair look like a crown of curls. The illusion was quite attractive, and it exploited the Chestoner's deference to a young lady. No man would be rough with him or even speak harshly to him, because he appeared to be a young lady of means.

Hidden under his illusion, he surveyed the defenses both for Danvers and for himself, to make sure nothing changed and also ensure that everything looked like it was going to pan out as Danvers hoped. The southwest gate was still shoddily built and the wall threatening to fall down of its own accord, and most of their defenses were focused to the north and northwest, the expected path of the army. The Chestoners nor the Loreguard had blocked off the streets, which was a critical tactical error, for they were of the false belief that Danvers' army was filled with Arcans wielding farm tools and only a few hundred humans with real weapons. The reason for that was because of Danvers' brilliant job of keeping the true size of his army secret, even as they sacked plantations after entering Carin, never letting the civilians see more than a few dozen men and doing a great job of evading enemy scouts and hiding the number of horses in his host by having the Arcans move both in front and behind, so their tracks wiped out the hoofprints. Human scouts on horseback were no match for Arcan scouts using the forest for cover, so the Loreguard couldn't get a single scout close enough to see the enemy army, mainly because it moved mainly at night. Clover's deal with a spirit left the enemy vulnerable to what their alchemical scrying told them, for their scrying only showed the Arcans in Danvers' army, not the humans, a critical bit of misdirection that left the Loreguard with insufficient intelligence to appreciate the true threat Danvers posed.

The Loreguard commanders were cautiously optimistic they could take an Arcan army. The Chestoners were already celebrating their impending victory.

Fools.

Kyven was moving with a purpose, for he had a job to do. It wasn't going to be easy to clear the courtyard and open the gates with him being unable to replace the commander of Fort Summer, a dashing buccaneer of a dark-haired Chestoner who called himself Admiral Greggson, but before he tackled that problem, he had the tower cannons to deal with. They had to be disabled before Danvers arrived, because those cannons could shell the ridge where Danvers intended on massing up the diversionary attack. That was where he was going, for it was only an hour before sunset, and the army would arrive at Cheston not long after it got dark, using the darkness as a shield to set up. After he disabled the cannons, he intended to allow himself to be spotted, to let them know he was here. The main reason for that was because he wanted them uncertain, second-guessing everything, even the commands of their own officers, since they knew he could take someone else's appearance. He had a tool with him for that, a modified Briton rifle that was perfect for distance shooting. From that cannon tower, Kyven could fire on half the city, making him a powerful sniper. He was also armed with an impact rod, a firetube, a shockrod, and fifteen posts knives in a bandolier over his shoulder.

What he didn't have with him were the Arcans and the Lupans. Sirra and Dauro had been very unhappy to be left behind, but nowhere near as much as Ebony and the boys. They had wanted to be with him as he infiltrated the city, fight with him and for him, but there was no place in this dangerous game for anyone but him.

But the fort was only half of what was going on, and half of his plan. He'd been in town since just before noon, and since the moment he stepped in through the southwest gate, he'd been busy. The streets of Cheston were absolutely *filled* with Arcans, many of them being forced to work to reinforce the shoddy walls. Those Arcans would be the first step of his plan,

which was intended to complement Danvers' plan. The second he had the chance, he slipped into an illusion of a Loreguard officer, and he made the rounds of Cheston. Every single Arcan he encountered, he stopped and checked their collars, but in reality he drained them. He let the Arcans see his glowing eyes, and spoke a single word. "Midnight." Much as it had in the pen in Riyan, it was very effective. The Arcans gaped at him, and when they realized he drained their collars, they fell into furious whispering among themselves, making their plans to escape at midnight. He covered the entire city in about six hours, draining *thousands* of collars, because his intention was a simple one; if the Chestoners tried to slaughter their Arcan slaves when the invading army got a foothold in town, and it appeared that Cheston would fall, he wanted those Arcans to have a fighting chance. He would not allow them to be murdered, he would not let them be held down and have a club crush their skulls, as that haunting image of that mink Arcan being killed in this very town still stuck with Kyven to this day. He would give them a chance, given them their opportunity to be free, and if not to be free, then to fight. No human would advance on a group of Arcans with a club and believe it would be a simple task to murder the lot of them to deny the invaders the chance to get them.

By the time he'd adopted this illusion, there wasn't an Arcan on the streets of Cheston that had a working collar. He couldn't get absolutely all of them, for many Arcans were being held in the kennel and in people's houses, but those who were being held in the city by their plantation masters had drained collars. And at midnight, when the army attacked, the mass escape of the Arcans within would cause chaos.

Men watched him walk by, giving him smiles and appreciative looks, and he had the illusion smile back flirtingly, acting the perennial Cheston debutante. He strolled along the route that Danvers intended to take to the fort, carefully assaying the situation under the illusion, and seeing that Danvers had been right in his assessment. They had virtually no defenses along the route, so confident they were that they'd stop the attack at the outer wall. Clearly, they believed that shooting a few cannonballs into the Arcan formation would panic the slaves and send them running before they

reached the wall, then they'd just trot out and capture as many as they could to keep or to sell, given Arcans were worth upwards of a hundred chits each right now, even for the weak or old ones. The buildings that Danvers intended to take over along the way were perfectly chosen to give the men inside them a wide arc of fire on the rest of the town. Men in those buildings could stymie any attempt to move troops through critical intersections due to sniper fire, and that would slow the response as the army tried to stop Danvers as he tried to take Fort Summer.

It was a daring plan, but it was brilliant in its planning and would be utterly devastating should it succeed.

When Kyven reached the fort, he had the illusion saunter by the open gates to the fortress, which consisted of two heavy doors and a portcullis they could drop in front of them, and while the illusion smiled at the ten men guarding the gate, underneath, Kyven studied the workings of the gates. The gates were old-fashioned, would require men to close them by hand, but the portcullis was controlled from an archaic gatehouse over the entrance, where the chains holding the portcullis aloft ran up into the gatehouse through openings above. Kyven could disable the portcullis, but the doors would be trickier. If they had any sense at all, they'd close the gates as soon as Danvers' army arrived, but he doubted they would. But, they would close the gates when word of the attack on the southwest gate reached them, they wouldn't be that crazy to leave them open with an enemy force threatening to gain entry into the city proper.

No, he could keep the gates open. He knew how to do it. It would just require him to wait until it was too late for the enemy to figure it out.

But first things first. It was about a half hour until sunset, and with his rounds in Cheston completed, it was time for Kyven to move. The three batteries of cannons Danvers had worried about had already been eliminated from contention, having been done while he was out draining collars. The men had fallen all over themselves to show the pretty young lady the cannons, and while the illusion ooh'd and ahh'd over them, under the illusion, Kyven used a clever little magical concoction Clover had

whipped up with the help of a spirit. It was a flask of silvery liquid, and he poured it into the fusehole of each cannon as he passed by them during his “inspection” of them. The liquid was literally liquified steel, and while it was liquid when it came out of the flask, it quickly hardened back to its original state once it was removed from the flask and the magic keeping it in a liquid form faded quickly. The liquid metal clung to other steel like a magnet, and it only took about a shot-glass full of the liquid to completely fill in the fuse hole, and then harden. Those plugs were perfect, and no amount of hammering or auguring would make them come free, for the liquid steel literally welded itself with the surrounding steel, closing the fuseholes permanently. The cannons looked just fine, but when they loaded them and looked to set powder in the fuse hole, they’d find the holes sealed over with steel. They could load them all they wanted, but if they couldn’t *fire* them, they were just very large and very impressive paperweights.

Once he was out of sight, Kyven detached himself from his illusion and hid in an alley and had the illusion walk to a door and seem to open it and walk in, which itself was an illusion. He retreated back into the alley, into the shadows of twilight, then simply hid in the alley, saving his strength and waiting. Danvers intended to attack at midnight, and he couldn’t move until the attack was imminent. Timing was everything in this. He intended to attack the cannon towers, draw the soldiers in the fort to the towers, then attack the main bailey just as Danvers attacked, so he didn’t have quite so many men to deal with.

He rested against the wall, even napped a little, until his talker vibrated in his belt pouch. He took it out and turned it on. “Go ahead.”

“Ten minutes,” came Clover’s voice.

“Understood. Go. Expect chaos on the streets when you come in.”

“Good luck.”

“You too.”

In reality, Clover's work had already been done, for she was too tired now to continue. She had put a Blessing on every human in the army that would last until the sun rose, that would give them the ability to see in the darkness as if it were a sunny day. It was a very simple Blessing, but she had to cast it literally thousands of times, and it had taken her all day to finish. She'd cast until she was too tired to continue, rest and eat raw meat to recover, then keep going. That was going to be a *critical* asset for their side, since it gave their entire army the ability to see in the darkness. The side effect was that it caused every man's eyes to glow like a Shaman's eyes, which meant they couldn't hide in the darkness. But it would certainly scare the shit out of the Chestoners when they saw rows and rows of glowing eyes looking at them from the ridges, like an army of Shaman. It was the same spell the Shaman put on masks to make the eyes of the wearer glow, which was where the Masked had earned their names, from the masks they wore that hid their identities and made their eyes glow to throw people off when they dared attack in the open.

Ten minutes until the army crested the northern ridge overlooking Cheston and revealed themselves, while the real attack circled to the southwest and waited for the diversionary northern attack to set up. That meant that the real attack was about a half hour away. The northern force would form up, get the army's four cannons set up, then start shelling the north wall to draw the Cheston defense north. Kyven had to be ready before that happened, for the tower cannons could fire on that ridge, where the other cannons in Cheston didn't have the range to fire that far uphill at that distance. Well, some of them did, but Kyven had disabled those cannons. The ones in the fort that had that range were pointed towards the ocean, and the Chestoners, in their arrogance, had not dismounted them from their sea-facing positions and moved them to land-facing positions. They were relying on the batteries in Cheston proper to fire on the enemy army if it attacked.

Ten minutes. No problem.

Kyven vanished from the alley and entered the shadow world, and fought off the vertigo as he took in the shadows of the city. In the darkness,

most of the city was visible to him in the shadow world, including the majority of the interior of the fort. He could see the six men in each turret to man the big cannons up there, and he could see that he could easily attack them. He took several steps to the shadows of the turret chamber on the south side, then converged a gateway and stepped through even as he willed it to pass around him. He stepped into the back of the turret chamber, just beside the stacks of gunpowder barrels and cannonballs, and all six men were at the three turret windows that gave them a nearly complete arc of fire in every direction but back towards the other turret cannon. The cannon was mounted on a rotating platform in the middle of the room, which was turned using a pulley chain attached to a big wheel right next to him. There was a second control on the cannon itself to adjust its muzzle height.

He struck without warning. All six men died instantly as a pale blue cone of magical cold blasted over them, emanating from his hand and encompassing the entire front of the circular chamber before him. The men were frozen in that instant of death, to become grisly, frost-rimed statues of frozen flesh that stood as if locked in time, one man even having a trail of brown ice trailing from his teeth as he was spitting out tobacco juice.

He moved quickly. First, he took several barrels of gunpowder and broke them open, then poured them down the stairs leading up to the turret. He then closed the door into the turret, threw the heavy iron locking bar to bar the door, and pulled his rifle over his shoulder. He blended his body into the shadows as he loaded a round in the chamber by actuating the loading lever under the rifle's stock, then he turned and took careful aim across the fort, to the six men who were very visible to him in the south turret, and who were all just standing at the edges of the windows, looking out over the city and the dark forests beyond, searching for any sign of movement or light from the enemy army.

His first shot took the nearest man in the head, blowing half the other side of his head out as the bullet went completely through. He worked the lever with quick and practiced motion as the other five men reacted to the gunshot, a much higher, sharper sound than a musket, and another man's head exploded from one of his bullets. The other four men dove for cover,

taking up their muskets as alarm bells sounded in the fort, but what they didn't know was that Kyven could see them through the stone, for his eyes were open to the spirits. He cocked the rifle and simply waited, watching the men, and when one man settled himself to rise up and look over the battlement to see what the hell was going on, just a quick glimpse, Kyven aimed at the space where his head would be and waited for him to move. When he twitched, Kyven pulled the trigger, which caused the man to rise up right into the bullet's path. It hit him high in the head, just over his hairline, and it literally blew the top of his head off.

“Sniper!” one of the three men in the turret screamed. “He’s in the north turret! Sniper! Sniper in the north turret!”

One of the frozen men shattered as someone on the ground fired a musket up at the turret, sending frozen chunks of flesh flying in every direction. Kyven looked through the stone and saw six men down there with muskets, and the other five had their weapons pointed at the turret, waiting. He formed a quick illusion in his mind and beseeched the fox for the power to cast the spell, and she responded. A sudden snarling bark issued behind the six men, and one of them turned to look to see what he thought was a Lupan lunging at the men. He screamed and brought his musket to bear, but the illusion blurred and vanished as Kyven swung over the battlement with the rifle in their moment of distraction. He fired two quick shots, working the lever with practiced ease, killing one of them and missing with his second shot, since he was already retreating back behind the wall as they turned back to him and the men in the south turret swung around to take a shot at him. Spinters of stone stung his face as he whirled back into cover, but the men in the south turret had seen what he wanted them to see when they looked him in the eyes as he whirled back out of view.

“Shaman!” one of them screamed, almost hysterically. “Shaman in the turret! It’s a fucking Shaman!”

He heard the footsteps barreling up the stairs behind the door, the first of the responding soldiers to the attack. Kyven took the firetube from his belt and aimed it at the crack under the door, then enacted it. A billowing

cone of flame roared out of it, hitting the door mostly, but enough went underneath just as the men on the other side came around the circling staircase and got within sight of the door. They must not have noticed the crunching from the gunpowder under their feet as they came up the stairs, but they sure as hell cared when the tongues of flame that came under the door ignited the powder. Gunpowder in open air doesn't explode, but it does burn, and it burns *fast*. The men shrieked when the powder ignited, the cracking, popping sounds loud behind the door as the fire raced down the stairs, and then he heard the howls of agony when the powder in which they were standing ignited, catching their boots and breeches on fire. He heard at least one of them fall down, probably falling into the burning powder as the fire raced down the stairwell, then glanced through the walls and door and saw eight men in the circular staircase as it wound the outside wall of the turret, two men laying on the stairs, one beating frenetically at his legs, and the other five running back down. He heard a sharp *crack* and saw the man beating at his legs get thrown against the wall as his powder horn ignited, and that powder, in a confined space, *did* explode, ripping a huge chunk out of his hip and sending him crashing to the stairs, where his lifeblood poured out of a gaping wound in his hip. The fire reached the barrels that still had a lot of powder in them, and the turret shuddered as a loud *BOOM* roared through the stairwell, as all that powder in those broken barrels ignited at once.

Seeing the men were no threat, he opened the door, which allowed in a cloud of acrid blue smoke from the gunpowder, the smoke filling the stairwell and only moving after the door was opened to give it a place to go threw four more breached gunpowder barrels down the stairs, then shut and locked it again.

He was counting the minutes. Any minute now, the army would become visible on the northern ridge, but at the moment most of Cheston's attention was fixed on the fort. Kyven fired his Briton rifle until it was empty, using spirit sight to see when it was safe to come out of cover and fire either at the south turret or at the ground, but he'd been forced to switch targets and shoot a few snipers setting up in windows on the upper floors of

the buildings facing the fort. They knew he was there now, and knew it was a Shaman, so he was fairly sure that the Loreguard and the Cheston commanders knew it was *him*...and that was what he wanted them to know. He wanted them to wonder if every man they saw was really that man or if it was him once the south turret went silent, wanted them to worry, wanted them to doubt.

But for now, he had to temporarily disable the cannon. Feeling that the gunpowder dust from those kegs he threw down the stairs had settled by now, he opened the door and used the firetube to ignite it. He slammed the door shut in the face of a sudden raging inferno, which would fill the turret stairwell with caustic, deadly smoke, and keep the men out of it. There was a minor explosion when the fire reached the kegs holding what gunpowder didn't fly out during their tumbles down the stairs, but it wasn't enough to break down the door. He took some coffee from a cup and poured it on the catchbar that held the locking bar, and froze it, putting a coat of ice on the bar and its frame that stuck them together until it melted. Then after seeing that he still had the attention of the four men in the south turret, he reloaded his rifle before slinging it over his shoulder, took out his impact rod, and shadow walked out of the turret.

He appeared at the door leading to the south turret, just outside the door. The men hadn't closed and barred the door, and that would be their fatal mistake. He covered himself in an illusion of a Cheston Militiaman and stomped his feet on the steps as if he was running up, then he stepped up to the landing. "I'm coming in!" he barked before poking his head in. "Report!"

"It's a Shaman!" one of the men said in a frenzied voice. "He's in the north turret! He musta did magic on the men over there, cause they're all just standing like they're frozen in place!"

"You men, get downstairs," he ordered as he unshouldered his rifle with one hand, the other holding his impact rod, which was hidden by his illusion. "I'll deal with the Shaman."

“By yourself?”

“It only takes one shot,” he said simply. “Now go!”

The three men, happy to follow the orders of another which got them out of harm’s way, rushed towards the door, going past him. The first two got out the door before the last one slowed to a stop. “Hey, ain’t you supposed to be with other men?” he asked suspiciously.

It was the last thing he ever said. The impact rod took him full in the face, killing him instantly and blasting him off his feet and through the door, where he crashed into the other two men and knocked them down the stairs. Kyven then quickly did the same thing, breaching the nearest keg of gunpowder with the butt of his impact rod, then hurling it down the stairs. The two men screamed in fear and literally rolled down the stairs to try to get away from the gunpowder. Kyven sent two more breached kegs down the stairs, then set fire to it with the firetube, then slammed the door as caustic smoke filled the stairwell from the gunpowder. The turret shook when the fire reached the powder in the remains of the kegs, but would also fill the stairwell with choking smoke and make any attempt to get to the door a dangerous proposition. He then froze the locking bar to the frame, this time using the blood of one of the dead.

He shadow walked again just as he heard the sharp booms of the cannons north of town; the diversionary force was in place, and they had started shelling. He heard the explosions, the tearing of wood, and knew that the army was right on schedule with the plan. If Danvers himself was on schedule, his riders and Arcans were circling Cheston and would be in position overlooking the southwest gate in just a few minutes, to give the Chestoners time to swarm the north with their forces. And this was where Kyven came into play again, for he had the perfect vantage point. He looked out over the city, seeing the glowing forms of the living through the stone of the turret, and saw that Danvers had indeed predicted correctly. Men were moving from the west wall, redeploying north, and the cannons arrayed about town were being loaded. He heard a startled shout from below, then another, and he saw that his sabotage had finally been noticed.

His talker beeped, and he pulled it out. “Go.”

“Two minutes,” Clover called out.

“Turrets secured.”

“Move to stage two.”

“Understood. The way will *not* be clear.”

“Understood.”

He had two minutes before Danvers assaulted the southwest gate, and if the Chestoners were smart, they closed the fortress doors. According to Danvers, it would take them about fifteen minutes to reach the fort once they had the gates open, and that might take more than fifteen minutes itself.

A half an hour...spirits. This was going to be brutal.

But there was no help for it.

He again shadow walked out of the turret, and this time, he appeared within the gatehouse over the main gates. There were six men in the gatehouse, two at the portcullis winch and four musketmen at murder holes looking out over the city. Only one man noticed him appear, but he died before he could utter a sound, when Kyven froze him, the other musketman, and the two winch operators where they stood with a blast of cold, a blast that took it out of him. The other two musketmen noticed the sudden chill in the room, but neither had a chance to act on it, since their attention was outside. They too died, frozen in place, and Kyven had to pant to recover, knowing that he was tiring himself out before he even did the hard part, but there was no help for it. He needed those bodies to at least look like they were where they were supposed to be.

He moved quickly. First, he jammed the portcullis winch so it couldn't be moved from its current position, then he retreated into the shadows behind the winch, blended with the shadows, and then sat down on the floor and took in several deep, centering breaths. He needed all his strength for

this, so he rested as long as he felt it was safe, took a bit of raw beef out of his pouch and wolfed it down to get a little energy back, then closed his eyes and centered himself. He'd studied the inner courtyard of the keep under the illusion of a fly around noon, so he was intimately familiar with the place and how things looked. He very carefully built the illusion he had in mind, laboring to make it as detailed as possible, instilling such a level of realism into the images that he hoped they would take on aspects of reality themselves...it was absolutely critical that they did so. Absolutely critical.

This was the moment. This was the time when he had to show himself and his totem that he was a master of illusions, because never before had so many depended on his ability to alter the very perception of reality of others. If he failed, then Danvers and his invading force would be stopped at the fort and wiped out, and that would break the army. He had to succeed...he *had to succeed*. On the first try. Just as his totem had long ago told him.

He moved quickly but carefully, completing the images in his mind, then looking them over with swift but exactly critical eyes. They looked proper. He then injected the *substance* of the illusions into them, the feel, the weight, the smell, how shadows played over them, how they loomed and looked imposing. When he instilled the proper substance into the illusion, he then put it in the back of his mind, not casting it but keeping it ready at a moment's notice, then wove a much simpler illusion that was much easier, since it was an illusion of himself. He opened his eyes and looked through the stone into the inner courtyard, and saw that Admiral Greggson was there, along with nearly twenty men manning the battlements over the courtyard, and another twenty men down in the courtyard itself. There had been more earlier, but those men were now battling through the choking smoke at the turrets to try to gain entry to them.

He created his first illusion. To the men in the courtyard, the human Shaman dropped from the roof of the fort and onto the battlement not twenty paces from Greggson, eyes glowing and hand swinging towards him as if to kill him. One of his guards reacted swiftly to the attack, raising one of those repeating pistols and firing. A bloom of blood exploded across the

illusion's shoulder, and then the figure dropped off the battlement as the alert guard fired again and again, but hitting nothing but wall and ground. "Shaman!" someone screamed, and then the figure ran with a sudden and unnatural burst of speed, running out the open gate while being chased by a volley of musket fire, turning and vanishing from their viewpoint.

"Send men after him!" Greggson shouted. He held a talker up to his ear, and he suddenly paled. "And close the gates! Close the gates!"

"Close the gates!" the order was relayed by several men, and then Kyven heard someone near the gatehouse scream "lower the portcullis!"

It was time.

Kyven centered himself and brought the illusion back into the forefront of his mind, giving it one final inspection, then he beseeched his spirit for the power to cast the spell. She responded immediately, and what was surprising to him, *in person*. She melted from the shadows literally in his lap, and she touched her nose to his as her paws rested on his shoulders. *Now*, she intoned in his mind.

Below, in the courtyard, the huge, iron-banded main gates were covered over by an illusion of identical doors, identical down to the grain of wood in the squared logs that made them up and nicks in the edges. Nobody noticed the shift because the illusion laid over the real doors perfectly, seamlessly, and then those two massive doors slowly, finger by finger, crept forward on their hinges of their own volition as men surged towards them to separate from the real doors, now hidden by the illusion. At the same time, an illusion of the portcullis began to lower at a methodical rate of speed, chains rattling, metal squealing, and wooden pegs rattling against a backstop, just as the men would expect to see and hear as the portcullis lowered. There was even a tremble in the ground when the pointed bases of the portcullis bars slammed home into recessed holes in the fort's entrance, then there was the sound underneath of those bars being locked in place by locking pins under the entry stones, to prevent the portcullis from being easily raised.

Kyven was too lost in concentration as men rushed to the doors, too anxious or afraid or distracted to notice that the doors had moved about a rod from their normal position, of their own volition, then reached out and touched them. Their hands did not fall through the illusion. They met the illusion's surface as if it were a solid object, their minds accepting what their eyes saw as reality, and the feel of the illusion reinforced it as the men pushed against the heavy doors. They barely budged at first, but then more and more men reached the doors and joined in, which caused both doors to swing with building momentum. The right door banged against the entryway first and rebounded slightly as the left door was nearly closed, and then it too slammed home as the ten men on the doors leaned against them, held upright by the power of Kyven's ability to make them accept his illusion as their reality, just as he had defied gravity by accepting his Wolveran as reality and was able to climb it. In his mind, the boundary between illusion and reality blurred, and then broke down as he took what *he* wanted to be reality and pushed it against what was actually there.

And he won the battle.

The two massive steel locking bars at the top and bottom of the gateway fell home on the door, locking it in place. And once the doors were closed, he withdrew all substance from the illusion of the portcullis except for its visual effect, so those outside didn't see the portcullis disappear, to save his energy for the door. He then girded himself and concentrated all his effort on those doors, on those huge doors, for he had to hold that illusion until Danvers and his army reached them.

It was the hardest thing he ever did in his life. He could hold illusions for a long time, but he started already tired and this was not just one big illusion, but *three*, because there were two doors and the portcullis outside. He was able to manage it because he consolidated all three into a single effort, looking at them as a whole from above, able to see them all from his vantage point. Since the illusions were in place, he was able to close his eyes and maintain them, and he was forced to, forced to put everything else out of his mind and throw everything into maintaining those doors. The

only attention he spared for himself was to keep an eye out for the army, because he had to know when it approached.

Outside, it was anarchy. Freed Arcans were *everywhere*, running around in groups as disorganized Chestoners and Loreguard weren't quite sure what to do. The Arcans that had been forced to stand in alleys and along the sides of streets were now moving, running away from the shelling north, fleeing to the south past the fort and, bless them, they were drawing some of the enemy army away from the fort as the soldiers gave chase. There was sporadic musket fire, but for the most part the Arcans simply ran...until they realized they had the advantage. He saw one such drama play out right in front of the fort, when two Chestoners chased a group of ten Arcans who were wearing ragged clothing, plantation worker clothes, chased them with whoops and amused shouts until the Arcans were stopped by a fence. Those Arcans then turned on the two men and attacked them. One man tried to raise his musket, but he was swarmed over by five of them while the other was tackled by a small ferret Arcan before he could bring his musket to bear. The screaming of the men echoed through the square, until it trailed off to silence. The ten Arcans then ran away, carrying the men's muskets and knives, leaving behind two bloody corpses.

Stay strong, Shaman, his spirit intoned, trying to bolster him with her presence...and it worked. He drew strength from her, from the fact she wasn't just watching him, but touching him, right there for him, and he would make her proud. He would prove to her that he was her Shaman.

But the minutes pressed on him. Sweat beaded from his forehead. His hands began to tremble as he reached out for his spirit, and she allowed him to touch her, gripping her soft, thick fur. The illusion weighed more and more on him, until he felt as if it was crushing him, smothering him. *Strength, Shaman*, she called, cutting through his fatigue with her call and refocusing him when he came dangerously close to losing his concentration.

I'm not going to make it, he thought to himself as he gripped his spirit's fur, as his mind swam in crushing fatigue.

You can, she called to him. I am here. I can help you.

How?

Make a bargain with me, Shaman, she crooned softly. I can help you.

No! No...no, I will not!

You must. They are depending on you.

Even in his fatigue, even through his concentration, he felt his blood run cold. But he was about to fail, and the army was nowhere in sight. They were depending on him. Lives, hundreds of lives, were at stake. The outcome of the war may very well be at stake should Danvers fail to take Fort Summer.

He had no choice. She had trapped him again.

I beseech you, shadow fox, he called through his mind-swimming fatigue, beginning the ritual of summoning. I beg you for your aid.

And what do you offer for my favor? she replied in a victorious tone.
Will you pay my price?

What aid do you offer?

I will give you the strength to carry through your spell until the army arrives. What do you offer for my favor?

What do you wish?

I would have Danna's Seal.

I will not give it, he declared adamantly. Even should it cost me this army.

Indeed, she murmured, amused by his adamance, but sensing that he meant it. Danna mattered more to him than this army, and the shadow fox now knew it. Then I demand a service.

You demand what you already have, for I am a totem Shaman.

I demand a service you would not perform should you have a choice.

No. I will offer you no more than you offer me. You offer me an extra fifteen minutes of strength, which is a simple thing for you to do. I will offer you no more of a service in return, neither by time nor by effort, and in no way, shape, or form will I agree to any service not spelled out here and now. I will not let you trick me into giving you Danna's Seal.

Then you will fail.

And so will you, and all the plans you have made concerning this war will be for naught. Is Danna's Seal worth watching your plans crumble to dust, shadow fox?

There was a brief silence, and then the shadow fox licked him on the cheek. *Wisely done, my Shaman, she answered in a mysteriously amused voice. Very well, I am inclined to grant you your boon. I will restore your strength, and I will inform the army that the doors of the fort are nothing but an illusion so they do not slow them down. In return, my price will be that you sire a second litter of pups with Umbra, which you can do while transformed by the amulet. I will not have to change you back. Is this a fair bargain?*

He didn't even hesitate. *I agree to your terms.*

Instantly, newfound strength flowed into him, revitalizing him. The fox had her jaws in his neck, and her bite had drawn blood...and in that touch of her fangs with his blood, her strength flowed into him. She restored him to vigor, feeling as if he'd used no magic at all. That newfound strength was immediately channeled into his illusion, bolstering it, and he found it much easier to maintain...though its size did still drain him considerably faster than a smaller illusion would. She remained in his lap, her paws on his shoulders, and she licked his neck almost sensually, licking away the wounds she had inflicted with her bite. He kept hold of her, using that sense of touch as a focus, and besides, her fur was soft and she was warm, and he liked the sense of her nearness even as he hated her. She continued to lick his neck even after his wounds were long healed, then she put her forehead

against his and maintained that touch, and that communion, continuing to offer her quiet support as he labored with his restored strength to hold the illusion.

For long minutes, his restored strength drained steadily as he maintained his illusion, and watched for the army. He heard the cracking of Briton rifles, heard distant shouts and screams, some of the Arcans, but he maintained his concentration. Long minutes went by as the sharp reports of Briton rifles got closer and closer, and the men below got antsy as those sounds neared them, but he maintained his concentration. He then saw the army racing out of the side street, being led by men on horseback with Arcans behind, even with six Lupans loping just behind Strider, and they pulled up quickly and shouldered their rifles, both men and Arcans. A blasting volley swept over a dozen men off the walls, and then they surged forward towards the seemingly solid doors, which confused the men on the walls for a fatal moment.

The men charged their horses towards the doors, they they *went right through them*, jumping their horses over the lower locking bar as if they knew it was there. Then, to the stunning shock of the men in the courtyard, the doors just *vanished*.

That startled the hell out of the men in the courtyard, but what startled them more was the swarm of Arcans that raced in after them. Those Arcans moved swiftly, some of them climbing the walls with shocking speed, gaining a critical moment of surprise in which the defenders were immobilized by disbelief. His spirit moved as he stood up, but she stayed near him as he went to the window to help Danvers and the army any way he could. Finally, the courtyard defenders shook it off as Greggson jumped up with a musket in hand, but then he fell back with a smoking hole in his chest after Kyven channeled lighting against him.

The loss of their commander confused the men, but they did fight back. Several Arcans and two men were felled by musket fire before the courtyard turned into a chaotic melee. More and more Arcans and mounted men poured into the courtyard, and the defenders found that their walls

were no protection against Arcans that could climb. The men fired on those in the courtyard, but then had to fight off clawed Arcans that climbed the walls and stormed their positions. Arcans were felled by musket fire, but those behind swarmed over the men before they could reload, for they had no close-quarters weapons other than bayonets, and a man wielding a bayonet like a dagger was no match for an Arcan. As the men battled the Arcans on the battlements, the men on horseback in the courtyard fired continuously with their Briton rifles, sweeping the battlements of any man separated enough for them to get a clear shot, and mowing down quite a few squads of Chestoners who ran in from passages, killing them before they even had a chance. The six Lupans darted to and fro among the horses, killing the defenders who tried to attack the mounted men, slaughtering many of them as they came barging out of passages and tried to raise their muskets. Sirra and Dauro were among the six Lupans, and they killed swiftly and with coordination between themselves and the other four with them, proving to be a lethal and effective defense of the horses and the Equar.

And in the middle of it all was Lightfoot, Ebony, and his two boys. They fought like Arcans possessed, Lightfoot, little Lightfoot, a demon from hell as she moved through the flustered Chestoners with her shockrod and her pistol. She shot one man, fried another, then dropped her pistol and used her claws, ripping the life out of men left and right as the humans struggled to match the little cat's speed. Any man out of reach of her claws was fried by her shockrod, and the one human who had a chance against her, leveling his musket, pulled the trigger and shot one of his own men in the back when the lithe cat simply melted aside, her eyes never leaving the man's as she dashed up, then ripped his throat out with her claws. Ebony was an absolute nightmare on the battlements, her short yet strong claws ripping through men by brute force, but her more effective attack was to simply throw every man she could reach over the wall to fall the twenty rods to the courtyard below. She had the raw strength to toss men about like sacks of meal, and men were flung as she paced down the battlement, at least until she picked up a musket. She took hold of the barrel and shattered the stock against a man's head, almost ripping it off, then laid into the men

with the shattered musket, until all that was left was the steel barrel...but that was more than effective enough. His spotted cat and coyote boys were just as devastating. The cat was blazing fast, as fast as Lightfoot, but he was even stronger. His claws shredded men, sending blood flying with every swipe of his hands, as well as bodies when his claws hit bone and swept his enemies out of his way. The coyote had one of the impact rods from the Pens, and he knew how to use it, shattering skulls and bones and killing men with every swing, cleverly and wisely keeping men with fired muskets between him and the men who had yet to fire. At one point, he even grabbed one man and used him as a shield as he advanced on two men with their muskets pointed at him, the man's body absorbing the shots, then he cast the dead man aside and killed the two other men with expert strikes from the impact rod. Without pistols or shockrods, the men had no defense against Ebony, Lightfoot, and his two boys, nor any other Arcan on the battlements. Kyven helped where he could with his Briton rifle, picking off any man that had enough separation to give him a shot, firing his rifle empty. He then tossed it aside and took up his shockrod, sending lances of lighting from his window overlooking the courtyard down against the defenders, killing them with almost every discharge. He depleted his shockrod, and wanting to save his Shaman strength for what may come, he started pulling his posts knives and throwing them at any uniformed Chestoner he could single out. Though it was much further than usual for him to throw the light knives, the downward trajectory helped them reach their targets, and he proved that he was still one of the deadliest knife throwers in Noraam by killing twelve men with his fifteen knives.

In short minutes, seconds after he threw his last knife into one of the last pockets of Chestoners, the Arcans had the courtyard. More and more poured in, men and Arcans, even slave Arcans that had seen the attack and had fallen in behind it to join their brothers and sister, until nearly two thousand men and Arcans were in the fort, already swarming through the passages searching for defenders. Sporadic musket fire and sharp Briton rifle fire echoed in the passages, but in the courtyard, the army released the locking bars, then closed the doors...the *real* doors. They boomed shut loudly, and once they were closed and the locking bars were reset, Kyven

released the winch on the portcullis, clearing the dagger that had been jammed in it, and kicked the locking brake lever. The chains suddenly rattled as the drum turned, and the portcullis rattled down with shocking speed, then banged home to the sound of the locking pins securing it in place, shaking the gatehouse.

The fort was theirs.

Danvers was down in the courtyard, astride Strider, and there was a bloody gash on his forehead that dripped blood on his shirt. But his eyes were calm and calculating as he barked commands for the army to sweep the fort of defenders and secure the courtyard, sending squads of men and Arcans to specific points in the fort by a preplanned distribution. The Chestoners had been driven from the courtyard, and now the fighting was taking place throughout the entire fort, booming muskets and sharp Briton rifles trading shots deeper inside.

“Sweep the halls! Sniper teams, get to the murder holes and on the battlements before they organize to attack the fort! Willis, take your company and secure the armory! Vick, take your squad and make sure the sea doors are closed and secured! I want the artillery teams on those cannons immediately!” Danvers boomed. “Kyven! Kyven! Kyven, where are you!”

“Up here, General,” he called from the window of the gatehouse.

“Good lad! If you’ve blocked off the turrets, go unblock them so my cannoneers can get to work!”

“I’ll do that right now, but there will be a lot of defenders in the halls leading to the turrets! They were trying to retake them before you invaded!”

“Humbolt, Greenbranch, go reinforce the halls and get those artillery teams to their turrets alive! I want those turrets manned and shelling Cheston immediately!” Danvers barked. “Kyven, go! Go!”

It was a simple matter to shadow walk up to the north turret and unbar the door, but when he walked to the south turret, he noticed that the *things*

in the shadow world were close now. Not close enough to threaten him, but now they were too close to shadow walk without concern. He'd have to be careful if he walked again. He melted the frozen blood on the door and threw the bar, and saw his army rushing up the stairs, coughing from the smoke still lingering in the stairwell. They stumbled into the turret, and then looked around. "Alright, let's get to work!" a grizzled-looking older man with a gray beard barked. "Hunter, I need those Arcan muscles on the cannonballs," he told the canine Arcan that had come with them.

"Just tell me what to do, Sergeant," he answered, then he came up to Kyven. "Will you bless me before you go, Shaman?"

"Of course," he smiled, putting his hand on the Arcan's shoulder and reciting the ritual benediction. His tail was wagging when he scurried towards the neatly stacked cannonballs.

She was there as he came down through the smoke, stepping over a charred body on the stairs, the man he'd killed with the impact rod. She sat sedately, her tail wrapped around her legs, regarding him calmly with her glowing emerald eyes. He knelt before her, feeling that mixture of respect and anger, humility and hatred, and she stood up and put her nose against his jaw. In that touch, there was communication. *I am proud of you, my Shaman*, she declared. *You have proved your mastery of illusion, and you proved you are wiser than the last time we bargained*, she added impishly. *But know that there is more you can achieve with illusion, more than imposing your reality on the mind of another, and it is for that which you must now strive. And mind, Shaman, that I will take Danna from you eventually. Mark my words.*

You'll try, he thought blandly, which caused her to lick his cheek.

Go with my blessing, Shaman. Do what you can to assist.

I will, sister shadow fox. Thank you for your help earlier.

It was as we bargained, my Shaman. No more, no less. Be thankful I was bursting with pride at the perfection of your illusion, and my pride

dulled my bargaining prowess.

Then I'll make sure to impress you right before we bargain the next time.

I am sure you will try, she answered, amused. Now go. They still need you.

He stood up, and the shadows consumed her, until nothing but her eyes remained. Then they too vanished.

He put her out of his mind. He had little doubt her speech was part of her plan to get Danna's Seal, so he didn't put much weight behind it. But he did feel a bit of pride that she was proud of him. That was something he could feel good about.

Another thing he felt good about was that he finally at least held his ground against her in a bargain. It just took always keeping in mind that she was a deceptive bitch that could not be trusted.

He felt helpless and a little sad, but then again, there was no better way for an Arcan to die.

He knelt by the body of a male canine Arcan, shot through the chest by a musket ball, eyes open and glazed. He was one of 37 Arcans and 9 humans killed in the fort as the battle to take it was won by Danvers' army, and another 114 Arcans and 42 human soldiers had died attacking the southwest gate and charging the fort. Those brave snipers who had taken over the buildings had held them as long as possible, then they either escaped out the breached southwest wall or ran for the fort in the darkness, where they were pulled up on ropes. But, the casualties would have been much worse had they attacked during the day. The Loreguard and Chestoners were all but blind in the night, with only a handful of alchemical night spectacles, and those had been in the hands of the cannoneers so they could aim their artillery better.

But still, it was such a tragedy. This canine had been rescued from the pen in Riyan, and had died before he tasted true freedom. He had died short of his reward...but he died in a manner of his own choosing. He had died fighting for something. And for an Arcan, that was the best way to go.

He sighed and closed the Arcan's eyes, then stood up as the sounds of the cannons boomed through the fort, and the chatter of rifle and musket fire racketed from above. There was a contingent of Loreguard soldiers outside trying to retake the fort, but they had no cannons and little cover in the darkness, as their night-sighted opponents eviscerated their formations as they tried to move under cover of darkness, then pinned them down behind buildings. The turret cannons and battlement cannons were pounding Cheston from within, firing down on any concentration of enemy soldiers and blowing the walls out from the inside, pounding holes all through them in every direction. The cannons outside also pounded the city, and in just two hours, the city had suffered mightily. The Loreguard barracks had been the first building destroyed by the turret cannons, but other important buildings and objects had been destroyed since then, such the wharfs and docks, the city hall, the two largest stables in the city, and they had destroyed all the cannons that the Loreguard tried to move into position to attack the fort. They had even sunk every ship in the harbor, to prevent a military vessel from being able to easily navigate the harbor and attempt to get men inside the fort from the seaward side. The Chestoners were surrounded on the outside by the army and found themselves being raked with cannon and gun fire from their own fort, where the rebels with their accurate rifles were picking apart the Cheston defenders one sniper shot in the darkness at a time. With the Loreguard barracks and the weaponry contained within totally destroyed, any alchemical weapons that might breach the walls of the fort were denied to the defenders, since the other alchemical devices that might have been useful to them were in the fort, and now in the hands of the enemy. They had a groundpounder, a device that shattered earth and stone, they had a few grounders, and they also had a device that looked like a death machine, just with no black crystal to power it. The Loreguard hadn't brought out their heavy siege weapons, believing that they wouldn't be dealing with a situation where

they would have to attack a heavily fortified position, and they paid for it when the turret cannons pounded their barracks into a smoking crater, leaving not a single brick standing.

This was part of the plan. They had to do as much damage as possible in the darkness, where they could see, so the Chestoners had as little resources as possible available to them when the sun came up, so the army could withstand the assault on the fort. The Chestoners knew this fort, and if it had a secret entrance, they would know where it was. They had to cripple the Chestoners' ability to retake the fort, and part of that was to destroy any asset they could use to aid in that recapture. All the enemy cannons had already been destroyed, and now the cannons inside and outside, their targeting coordinated by talkers, were destroying every large building in Cheston that might hide or house a threat to them. The turret cannons were the ones blowing out the hastily built wall from the inside and firing on any concentration of Chestoners and Loreguard that tried to form up to attack the western ridge where their cannons and the rest of their army was located, while the battery cannons were shelling enemy concentrations and attacking buildings in the city. Clover was with the other half of the army, along with Ember, for the young vixen almost never left Clover's side now that they were in a dangerous position. What he would give to change sides with her, so her healing powers were where they could do the most good. The only attack the Chestoners made on the western ridge had been decimated by Briton rifles before they got within musket range.

Ebony stood behind him, as did his boys. They had found him quickly after the battle for the courtyard, and they had not left him. Nor had the Lupans. All six of them. The six Lupans and three fighting Arcans were a wall of pure intimidation against anyone who approached him, but he generally ignored them as he checked the still forms, looking for anyone still alive.

He found one. It was a slender, willowy female cat Arcan, her fur in a gray tabby pattern, one of the climbers who assaulted the battlements. She had a bad wound in her belly and several bayonet wounds in her chest. Yet despite those ghastly wounds, she was still alive. She held her hand up

weakly to him as he knelt by her. “Sha...man,” she whispered. “Will you... bless...me?”

“It is you who bless me, little sister,” he told her with sheening eyes. “I am so proud of you.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “May the spirits bless you, my brave sister, for you have earned their respect. May they give you every reward you have earned this night. May we all be as brave as you are, my wonderful sister, and may we never forget you and what you have done here this night,” he told her.

She gave him a weak smile, her teeth coated with blood, then her hand slipped limply from his, and her eyes glazed over in death.

He closed her eyes gently, then sighed and stood up. His trousers were soaked with blood from the thighs down from kneeling in pools of blood, but he didn’t even notice. It was times like this that he cursed his weakness, cursed his limitations. If he had more power, he could heal, but he was too weak. Too weak. It was almost infuriating, knowing he could cast a healing spell, but that it would kill him if he did so.

“She died fighting, Shaman,” Ebony told him. “She died her way.”

“I know,” he sighed. “But to get this close to freedom...it’s sad.”

“She’s free now, Shaman,” the coyote told him.

“Not the way I wanted to see it.” He glanced back at him. “And I guess I owe you a name.”

“I don’t know, Cuddlewuggums is growing on me,” he said dryly, which made Kyven actually laugh.

“But not a name worthy of a fighting Arcan who proved himself this night. So, in honor of your skill with a rod, I think I’ll call you Striker.” He looked to the cat. “And you are Fastpaw, because you are the fastest Arcan with your hands I’ve ever seen.”

“They are fine names,” Ebony told them.

Sirra came up beside him, and he stroked her flank, needing to touch, needing to comfort, which comforted him. He had fought, he had killed, even killed the innocent, but he had never seen anything like this. He had never seen bodies strewn about like refuse, had never known that Arcans who only wanted to be free had willingly fought, willingly died, to secure not their freedom, but the freedom of others. They had fought because the Shaman had asked them to fight, and now he felt no small measure of responsibility for the death around him.

His talker beeped, and he picked it up. "Yes, Clover?" he asked.

"It's me," Ember answered. "Clover is healing a few wounds. We had a horse fall on a couple of men."

"What is it, sister?" he asked.

"Clover just asked me to check in with you, that's all," she replied. "That everything is going okay here."

"Any trouble at all?"

"Not really. A few men tried to sneak close to us, but the Arcans caught them and killed them. We're bringing in a lot of Arcans from Cheston, though. They're coming out of the holes in the walls and running for the woods, and our scouts are bringing them to us."

He sighed. "Good."

"Is everything okay there?"

"Alright here," he said, then a cannon boomed. "How long until sunrise?"

"About an hour," she answered after calling out the question and getting a reply. "I'll call back at sunrise, brother."

"Alright. Be safe, little sister."

"You too, Kyven."

He put the talker back on his belt, then sighed and turned away from the dead female cat. There would be time for tears later, when they weren't fighting for their lives. "Alright, we have things to do, guys," he said wearily, as he stepped down the battlement and checked another Arcan.

He found no other Arcans alive that weren't already being helped by medics, so he helped in the only way he really could now, and that was with a rifle. The Lupans crowded the battlement around him, but they were too low to be hit by any musket fire as Kyven took up his modified rifle and served Danvers as a sniper, and one of his better ones. He and three other snipers, men dedicated to the long shot, were clustered on the top of the wall, quietly following the direction of their spotter, a young male wolf Arcan who had proven to have exceptionally keen eyesight and was the perfect one to spot trouble and direct their fire to it. Ebony and the boys took up rifles as well, having been taught how to shoot them after Kyven left the army, and while they weren't anywhere near as good as the four men, that was still bullets flying and pinning enemies down.

"How does it look?" one of the men asked him.

"I'm not sure, I haven't talked to Danvers for a while," he answered. "But from the looks of the city, I'd say that we're in good shape." They looked out, looking at the shattered buildings, and several fires that burned out of control near the docks. There had not been a single cannon shot in their direction since the fort cannons destroyed the artillery emplacements Kyven hadn't sabotaged, but those sabotaged cannons had been destroyed as well, just in case. "All we have to do is hold the fort until they realize we can destroy the city, then they'll surrender."

"Ten soldiers, six blocks, there," their spotter called, pointing down a street. All seven of them turned their rifles in that direction, and Kyven saw the men through spirit sight. The men were trying to move a cannon that had an intact barrel, enlisting the aid of four Arcans, but had had its mount destroyed by shelling. Five of them men slumped to the ground almost immediately after the snipers started firing on them, and two more fell to the ground as the survivors tried to flee for cover. The Arcans stood there

for a moment, then they too ran for cover, leaving the cannon behind. One of them grabbed at his neck as his collar punished him, and the other three dashed nervously back out as the Loreguard made them go back out into the enemy fire to move the cannon.

Not going to happen.

“Hold your fire,” Kyven barked, even as his body seemed to turn to cold water, and it shifted and changed by the power of his amulet. In seconds, the shadow fox Arcan stood in his stead, shivering off the sensation and getting out of boots that no longer fit his feet. Out there on those streets, this close to the fort, any human might be shot by the snipers, so he needed to be in Arcan form to go out there. The men in the fort would not fire on an Arcan. “I’ll be right back,” he told them, as the shadows rose up around the men and converged around him. They vanished quickly, taking him with them.

He stepped from the shadows behind the three surviving Loreguard, and killed them quickly with his impact rod, ambushing them. Two were dead before the last one even reacted to the attack, whirling around with a pistol in his hands, but then he too died when the rod crushed his skull, crumpling him to the ground. The four Arcans looked at him in shock, and hurried over to him when he beckoned them over. He pulled the collar off a burly canine male without hesitation, pulled off the other three, then knelt and rummaged through the dead men’s pouches. “Shaman!” one of them said in surprise. “Will you bless me, Shaman?”

“Later,” he answered quickly, moving to the next man. “Listen, all of you. Scavenge weapons from the dead, then run for the west side of Cheston, and be careful. An army of Arcans is on the west ridge. Run that way, and they’ll find you and take you in. Just be careful, the humans might try to shoot you. Stay off the main streets and keep to the alleys as much as you can, stay out of the light. The humans can’t see well in the dark.” He pulled the talker out of the dead man’s pocket, what he was searching for, then stood up.

“I want to stay with you and fight!” one of them declared.

“Alright then, come with me, and I’ll get you in the fort,” he told the small male mink.

“I’ll stay with you, Shaman,” the rodent, maybe a squirrel or some other type, added.

The four of them decided to stay with him rather than flee, so he carefully led them back to the fort. He used spirit sight to keep an eye on the soldiers, civilians, and what few Arcans remained in Cheston as they moved, holding the four of them up as a group of Loreguard rode down a side street on horses, pounding north, then leading them forward again. He got them up to the fort wall, then he called up to the wall. “Ropes!” he said as loudly as he dared. In seconds, two ropes were thrown down, and he got the Arcans started up the walls. He kept a careful eye on things until they were all the way up, then he grabbed a rope and hand-walked his way to the top with steady speed. “Thanks for not shooting us,” he said dryly to the men on the battlement.

One of them chuckled. “We almost did, Shaman. You should make yourself a little more conspicuous.”

“Sorry, you can run for your life with only so much dignity,” he answered, which made them all grin. “Alright, boys, come with me. I’ll take you to someone that can help you find a job to do.”

Dawn brought blessed light to the city of Cheston, but the dawn rose on a city that was barely recognizable.

Fires raged out of control around the docks, where the buildings were all made of wood and were packed close together. There were other fires dotted throughout the city, and a haze of smoke hung in the air like a pall, rising slowly in the heavy morning air. The booming of cannons still roared across the city as the occupied fort continued to shell the town around it, and the four cannons outside lobbed cannonballs into the city. Civilians

huddled in basements and cellars, and embattled Cheston Militia and Loreguard hunkered behind walls and buildings, trying to regroup at the far northern edge of the city, far out of range of the deadly rifles of the men holding the keep.

It had not been a good night for the defenders. The chaos of the Arcans running loose had distracted them for a fatal moment before the attack on the southwest gate, where the men learned the hard way that a wooden wall was no protection against Arcans. They had climbed the wall and stormed the defenses, then opened the gates and allowed the enemy army in. Every single man was on a horse, and the Arcans ran with them, moving far faster for the defenders to either react or keep up. Then, somehow, some way, they had managed to breach the main gate of the fort and stormed it, and now their precious Fort Summer was being occupied by the enemy. Then, in the ultimate insult, the fort's cannons were then used to attack the city the fort was supposed to protect. The defenders had known exactly where and how to attack, for they had destroyed every building important to the defenders, primarily catching them with their pants down and destroying the Loreguard barracks, and all the weapons it contained that had not been deemed necessary to use in this battle. Then there was the disastrous attack on those cannon emplacements outside. The humans had formed up and advanced, able to see their quarry because of the fires both behind and on the ridge, but they had been cut to ribbons far, far out of musket range by the strange weapons the attackers were using, some kind of new musket that had far more range and could be fired multiple times before having to reload. The attackers had been withered by that sustained gunfire, until they had been forced to flee, forced back behind the walls. And then Arcans had snuck out and braved death grabbing muskets up off the ground and running back with them, using the darkness in the middle of the field as cover to collect up the muskets. Some of them were killed in the attempt, but far more got back with muskets than were stopped, which only gave their enemies more weapons to use against them.

Battle...they were still in stunned shock. They had never in a million years dreamed that Arcans could fight with coordination and skill, but they

had seen it. They had seen them attack the southwest gate in a coordinated effort, then run with the horses through the city to the fort, moving with purpose. And now, there were Arcans armed with muskets and some kind of new firearm up on the battlements, shooting at any human that moved in the city below.

There had been some reprisals. A few hundred collared Arcans had been slaughtered by their human masters, and more had been killed as they tried to escape, but in the long run, it had been the Arcans that had gotten the better of their human masters this day, and the humans knew it. The Arcans penned up in the city had escaped in huge numbers, and some of them were even now with the enemy, being given weapons and fighting against their former masters. Thousands of Arcans had escaped, and now there was an army of Arcans fighting as a team, holed up in their own fort and on that fortified ridge to the west.

The defenders of the fort knew what was coming next. Now that it was daylight, the Chestoners and Loreguard would attack the keep, try to get it back, and they were ready for it. Men and Arcans lined the battlements armed with rifles and muskets, even armed with rock debris to throw down on to the enemies should they try to scale the walls. Clover had bargained with the spirits for an additional protection, and that was that no collar would work within a hundred rods of the walls. If the Loreguard collected up all the Arcans Kyven missed and tried to force them to storm the walls as gun fodder, they'd find out quickly that their tactic was going to fail. The men were even forced to gather at sunrise far from the fort, and stay behind buildings and out of sight, for the defenders would turn their cannons on any concentration of men they saw in the city. Which wasn't easy, since the other army on the western ridge could look down into town from a different angle, and they were communicating with the fort via talkers. The western spotters were calling in targets to the fort and vice versa, which made it extremely hard for the Chestoners to assemble any large number of men in one place in preparation for an attack.

Kyven was up on the battlement, feeling tired but knowing that he couldn't afford to sleep, because the Chestoners would make their play for

the fort any minute now. They absolutely had to take the fort, for Danvers could pound Cheston to rubble from within the fort otherwise. Kyven wanted to see what they came up with, for the they had no cannons, no alchemical siege weapons, no death machines, not even any heavy equipment. All they had were men, about twelve thousand soldiers and men who were conscripted during the night once their army penetrated the city and took the fort, and maybe what Arcans they could gather together to force to march in front to take the bullets.

But sunrise also brought some concern for Kyven and his people, for Clover called them at sunrise with disturbing news. “Look south,” she called over the talker. Kyven and Danvers went up to the south turret and looked south of the city, where there was a thin trail of dust.

“Shit,” Danvers growled. “Clover, send scouts.”

“I already did, General,” she answered.

“Another army?” Kyven asked.

Danvers nodded. “Moving this way from the look of it. It might be another Loreguard army, coming from Lanna to reinforce Cheston.”

“We’ll find out soon,” Kyven said.

As they worried about that, the Chestoners began to prepare for their attack. They formed up their soldiers behind the kennel, the one place they felt the cannons wouldn’t attack since the kennels had been untouched all night, still even holding the Arcans inside. They did as Clover and Kyven predicted, as well, for they pulled every Arcan they could get from the kennels, from the houses, from the pools of freed Arcans that had been recaptured during the night, and formed them up in front of the kennel, intending to use them in the attack.

Danvers watched them, then he smiled grimly. “Well, we can deal with that,” he said.

“What did you have in mind?” Kyven asked.

“They won’t charge the walls with their army, Kyven,” he explained. “They’ll get under the inside range of the cannons and set up in the buildings and along the walls and fire on us as they send the Arcans in to try to breach the keep. The only reason for it is to force us to divide our attention as they try to get in some other way. The Arcans are a diversion, nothing more.”

“So what do we do?”

“Simple. We open the gates and let them in,” he said calmly.

Kyven gave him a startled look. “And just let the soldiers behind them in?” he asked incredulously.

“Have you seen the inner courtyard, Kyven?” he asked, to which Kyven shook his head. “The lower passages out of the courtyard have all been sealed. The only way out of the ground level is to climb the walls. If we just open the gates, the Arcans, who have all the ladders, run in first. Now, the humans charge in after them, thinking we’ve just let them in, and now they’re in a large open area with only one way in or out, surrounded by Arcans, and they have no ladders. Odds are, the very Arcans they forced to attack the walls will turn on them in that confined space, especially after we tell them their collars no longer work.”

Kyven gave him a startled look, then laughed. “That’s devious!”

“Thank you. While we pull that little stunt on them, the rest of us have to watch for what they’re really going to do. I have large numbers of men and Arcans in every room in the keep, searching for a hidden entrance. I’ll almost bet there’s one here somewhere. They’re going to draw our attention to the front door while they attack from an unexpected direction. But they don’t know how many men we have in here,” he grinned. “I have enough men to cover the front courtyard *and* put so many men in every room and passage that any attempt to sneak in through a secret passage is going to get stalled. I just flood men and supplies to their breach and drive them back, then use the groundpounder they had in their arsenal to collapse the tunnel.

I have a man with a repeller at critical points in every lower hallway, ready to respond to any breach through a secret passage.”

“Repeller?”

“It’s an alchemical device,” he answered. “Fairly standard in militaries. It’s a shield, Kyven. It creates an alchemical shield that nothing can enter, but *only from the outside*. They’re fairly large and require two men to move, and they burn through crystals in about ten minutes once they’re activated, but what they’ll do is move the repeller into the passage so no man can get past it, then the men on our side of the shield simply shoot through it and kill the attackers. That ten minutes will be all we need to push them back.”

“Why didn’t they have those out when we attacked?”

“Because they never believed we’d get anywhere near the fort, let alone take it,” he said smugly. “But they’ve never had to deal with a Shaman like you, Kyven, someone that can make them doubt everything they see and hear. Draining half the collars in Cheston to free the Arcans? Sabotaging cannons without them noticing? Taking over the turrets single-handedly? Really, creating illusionary doors and tricking them into thinking the doors were closed? That was brilliant, Kyven, absolutely brilliant. I swear, if I had five like you, I could conquer Noraam.”

“I wouldn’t help you do that, General,” Kyven chuckled. “But thanks for the complement.”

“General!” an Arcan called, running up the stairs. “General, they found a hidden door in one of the cellars!”

Danvers absolutely beamed. “Excellent work. Put a repeller and two companies in that room and in the passages leading out of it with orders to kill anyone who comes through that door, and keep looking for other doors. There might be more than one.”

“Yes, sir!” the canine saluted, then rushed back down the steps.

“Why not collapse it?”

“And miss the chance to wipe out quite a few of them? Kyven, learn to take advantage of these opportunities.”

Kyven chuckled. “Savage.”

“War is savagery, Kyven. And nothing but.”

He was quiet a moment. “True,” he finally agreed.

As the cloud of dust got closer and closer, the Chestoners and Loreguard were almost ready to attack. They saw nearly a thousand men spread out just under the minimum range of the cannons, taking up positions in buildings and behind walls, ready to open fire on the fort. About a thousand frightened Arcans had been herded into an open plaza within sight of the fort’s main gate, and they were armed with sticks and ladders. All of them were collared.

“And here comes the diversion,” Danvers said as a single musket shot came from the plaza, and the Arcans started forward, quite unwillingly. The men all opened fire with their muskets, and the sounds of the musket balls hitting the stones of the fort was a loud staccato that directly preceded the sounds of the shots as they reached them. They kept firing, no doubt having men doing nothing but reloading muskets, but the defenders did not return fire, just kept under cover. “Now, call out to them when they get close,” Danvers ordered. “An illusion would do the trick. Tell them to come inside.”

“I have just the right one,” he nodded, opening his eyes to the spirits. He watched the Arcans as they ran towards the fort carrying their sticks and ladders, terrified of attacking the fort but knowing that certain death would come if they refused, rushing into the large courtyard area immediately outside the main gate. Kyven created his illusion, an illusion of himself in his Arcan form, twenty rods tall, with glowing green eyes. His illusion was intentionally transparent, nothing but a projection, but he was sure to put the illusion’s head so high that any Chestoner that took a shot at it didn’t shoot one of the Arcans in the back. He then spoke, but the illusion’s auditory component was such that it was very loud, but only to those within one

hundred rods of the illusion. Just one rod past that, and the voice was not in any way audible. In this way, the Chestoners had no idea that their Arcans were being given instructions that might cause them to gun down their own Arcans to prevent what was coming.

The illusion made them all skid to a halt, looking up at him in shock. The Arcan body and the glowing eyes told them that they were looking at a Shaman, or at least the image of one. “The humans cannot hear this,” the illusion boomed, which was inaudible more than a hundred rods away from it. “Your collars no longer work. Take them off. Take them off and come in, come in and join us, brothers and sisters. We will open the doors for you. Just mind that the humans will run up behind you as soon as the doors open, so be ready to fight them as we close them again.”

Behind the illusion, the portcullis began to raise, and the doors swung open.

“Come in,” he called, “come in and be *free*.”

They stood there in stunned shock for a moment, then one Arcan, a very, very young cat Arcan female, reached up and tugged at her bronze collar. It came off without resistance. The Arcans saw that, then they gave a great cry and surged towards the doors, ducking under the raising portcullis, knocking the brave Arcans who were in the courtyard opening them aside as they charged in.

The Chestoners were a bit startled that the defenders would simply open the doors, and then the reality of that dawned on them. Danvers’ prediction turned out to be correct, because the Chestoners and Loreguad didn’t immediately charge the gates; they had not expected the doors to open, and they knew they were nothing but a diversion. It took nearly a minute for them to decide that since the doors were open, then they should actually try to get inside, since they’d have the Arcans to do the dying for them. But, as they surged out to get into those doors, the defenders on the walls leaped up from their cover on Danvers’ command and opened fire, sending a withering hail of bullets and musket balls over the heads of the

Arcans and into them. The Chestoners were mowed down like wheat, over a hundred dying in that initial barrage, and that withering hail of fire caused the Chestoners to scramble back into cover. They tried to regather their wits as they were pinned down by a savage barrage of continuous gunfire. Any man that dared try to raise up or pivot around a corner and take a shot took his life in his hands, and had only an even chance to make his shot and get back under cover before he was drilled by enemy fire. The cover fire was so intense, so successful, it pinned the Chestoners down for over a minute, and that entire time the Arcans poured into the courtyard. The humans then tried to return fire, lay down cover fire of their own so they could form up to try for the gates, but it was too sporadic.

Then a cannon boomed. The men didn't immediately react, for they were too close for the high-mounted cannons to get an angle on them, but then they heard the whistle. The cannon had fired at a high trajectory arc, and the cannonball crashed about a half a block behind them, all but completely destroying a modest house. Another cannon fired, then another, then another, and the shrill whistle of the cannonballs plowed into buildings closer and closer to the Chestoners' positions facing the main gate. The artillery crews were finding the range on them, and they knew their number was up...but they were nothing but a diversion anyway. They decided to abandon the Arcans to whatever trap they were facing inside the main gate, then they pulled out carefully while under constant fire and retreated. The Loreguard captain, however, did take a device out of his belt pouch and put it to its maximum setting, then press its button, which would kill every Arcan wearing a Loreguard collar within five city blocks. He looked to the gate and expected to see the Arcans there drop dead in unison, but nothing happened. Nothing happened at all. He pressed the button again, but nothing happened. He checked to make sure it was enabled, even made sure it had a crystal in it, then pressed the button one more time, but nothing happened. Then he was thrown to the ground in a spray of blood and brain matter, shot through the head, because he spent a second too long looking around the corner at the Arcans.

The Arcans pressed into the courtyard, and then the portcullis ratcheted down quickly, and the doors began to close.

Deep in the fortress, the Chestoners were advancing through a secret tunnel that opened in one of the cellar storerooms. The tunnel was old and almost never used, opening under the city hall of Cheston, which had been shelled into rubble. But the Chestoners had cleared the rubble leading to the passage, and now five hundred Cheston Militiamen were marching quietly up the tunnel, armed with short-barrel muskets, pistols, shockrods, firetubes, and other close-quarter weapons, weapons ideal for fighting in the confined spaces of the fort's cellars and passages.

"The diversion attack is under way," came a voice through the talker in the hand of the commander, who was the fifth man in the line. "You're go to attack."

"Alright, men, get ready," he called as they approached the door, melting out of the darkness as their alchemical lamps got their light to reach it. "Remember, the armory is our primary objective. Left out the door, turn left at the first intersection, all the way to the end. Got it?"

They all rumbled in acknowledgement.

They reached the door. It was covered in dust and spiderwebs on this side, a simple bar holding it locked in place. The commander had them wait as those behind got up to them, packing them tight into the passageway. When they opened the door, the commander and the ten men around him would secure the cellar while a team of fifty men went straight for the armory. The rest of the men would spread out and secure critical intersections, and since they'd be discovered by then, they would then fight their way up into the fort. There was another thousand men already entering the tunnel behind them, and there would be an unending stream of men flooding the keep through its cellar until it was retaken.

The point man looked back to the commander, and he nodded. He quickly unlatched the bar on the door, then pushed it outward even as he drew his shockrod.

The door swung open, flooding light into the passage. The commander looked past the men, and instead of seeing an empty cellar, there were dozen of men in the cellar, and they had weapons pointed at the open door.

“Back!” the commander managed to say, then he said no more. Huge cones of fire roared into the passage as five men with firetubes set at maximum blasted hellish fire into the passage, incinerating the first twenty men in the line instantly. The men at the terminus of the attack were set on fire, and their agonized shrieks caused instant panic in the passage, for they were in a confined passageway and had nowhere to go as that fire advanced up the passageway. A few desperate shots fired up the passageway from the men who could see the ambush bounced off something invisible, causing it to flare to visibility on impact, then fade back to nothingness. The men set ablaze ran towards the attackers or back against their own men, setting them on fire, while a couple of them dropped and rolled on the floor, over and against the burning corpses of the dead. More fire blasted into the passageway as two men pushing a large wheeled cart in front of men unleashing firetubes into the confined space, projecting blistering cones of fire that ripped into the men as they tried to scramble backwards. Shouting and smoke and fire led to panic, and soon the men were clawing at each other to escape as those behind tried to fire on the attackers, only to have their shots and arcs of lightning bounce aside harmlessly.

It turned into a disorganized rout as the Chestoners were pushed back by continuous cones of hellish fire, as the men pushing the cart reached the bodies of the dead in the passageway and could push it no further. When the men got beyond the terminus of the fire, ten men armed with rifles began firing into the retreating men, felling a man with every shot simply because they had nowhere to go. The burning bodies illuminated the passageway along with the alchemical lamps, and the Chestoners that found themselves facing those rifles bravely raised their short muskets and returned fire, even as they were cut down. But their musket balls were stopped by the repeller,

where the rifle shots went right through and cut men down. The ten men fired five rifles empty each, killing over a hundred men in the confined passageway as they retreated, putting out their lamps and plunging their side of the tunnel into darkness, then they again took out their firetubes and completely depleted them not on the men, but on the floor and the walls, sustaining that blast of fire for over a minute, until the stones of the passageway were glowing a bright red and throwing off so much heat that they would cook anyone that tried to get past them. The men retreated as they bathed the walls in fire, heating the stones of the walls, floor, and ceiling, and charring the dead beyond all forms of recognition as they smoldered on the red-hot floor. The men then withdrew, and four other men dragged a heavy box-like device with three legs and a heavy cylinder extending down from the middle of them. They set it in the middle of the passageway. One man turned it on, and the cylinder slowly extended down to the floor, raised up, then fired down into it with shocking speed. A heavy *WHAM* rocketed up the passageway as the door was closed, and then the cylinder began a hasty rhythm of striking its cylinder on the floor, which sent a shockwave of force up the passageway. The retreating men felt the vibrations under their feet, and that only spurred them on, making them go faster.

Dust began sifting down from the ceiling as the shockwaves roared down the passage, then individual stones began to fall, dislodged by the shocks. Then not far behind the last man, they heard a sudden roaring cacophony, and a billowing cloud of dust roared over them, making them cough and choke.

“What the fuck was that?” one asked.

“Groundpounder,” another said grimly. “They was waitin’ for us. They knew we was comin!”

“We must have a spy somewhere,” another man declared angrily.

The men had no choice. They retreated back up the passageway so they could report not only their failure to take the fort, but the collapse of

the secret tunnel leading into it. If they wanted to take the fort, they'd have to do it the hard way.

The Loreguard and their Cheston allies pulled back to regroup, but Danvers and the attackers were more worried about that other army. Danvers paced after that attack on the fort was thwarted, as his unorthodox solution to the diversion netted them nearly a thousand Arcans to add to their army, and they waited for Clover's scouts to get a look at them. The cannons continued to fire, however, pounding Cheston mercilessly.

Kyven took the opportunity to rest, even as he moved through the hundreds of new Arcans, checking for wounds, reassuring them with his presence, redistributing blessings, asking them what was going on out there. The Arcans told him about a city in chaos, where the civilians were trying to flee, but being pinned down by the cannon fire, about frenzied Loreguard and Chestoners dragging every able-bodied man out of every hole to add to their defense, about them trying to pull men in from the plantations around to get enough men to attack the entrenched army outside the city walls, and just general confusion and fear. Half of the humans couldn't believe that the enemy had taken over the fort, and couldn't understand why the fort was shelling its own city. They told him that civilians, a few Arcans, and deserters were pouring out of the holes in the walls, running from the city and the fight, and they told him that there were bodies laying everywhere out in the streets, bodies of civilians, bodies of soldiers, and bodies of Arcans, killed either by the invading army, the shelling, or by the defenders themselves. One Arcan told him of a squad of Loreguard that had dragged four men from a hole and shot them dead, accusing them of being deserters. The youngest of them, the Arcan said, couldn't be more than fifteen years old.

It sounded insane out there...but war *was* insanity by definition.

His talker beeped, and he pulled it from his belt. "Yes, sister?"

“It’s the Flaurens!” she called out in glee. “It’s the Flaurens, brother! They’ve arrived! Tens of thousands of them!”

He couldn’t resist giving a whoop of glee. “Lucky speaks Flauren, Clover, get him out there!”

“I already have a Flauren officer here, brother,” she answered. “And there’s someone else here I believe you know.”

There was a brief pause, and a new voice came over the talker. “Ayah, Ah shore never thought Ah’d be seein’ you here, Kyv!”

“*Toby!*” he gasped, then he laughed. “Toby Fisher, what are you doing with a Flauren army?”

“Ah’m just doin’ what yo’ spirit paid me ta’ do, Kyv,” he answered. “Just wait til yo’ see me.”

“What, you’re even more scary looking?”

“No, Clover thinks Ah’m handsome now,” he answered.

He almost laughed, but then he got very serious, very fast. “You mean she *changed* you?”

“Ayah, fo’ just a little while,” he answered. “An’ I can change back ta’ mahself usin’ a little trinket she gave me, but it don’t last none too long. Why, Ah even have an Arcan woman now, just like Umbra was yo’ woman,” he declared. “Ah’ll introduce you when we get there.”

“She’s *with* you?”

“Ayah. Her name is Nightfall.”

Kyven was shocked a moment, then he could only laugh ruefully. So his spirit *could* do it to someone else! And she’d somehow managed to bargain Toby into the same trap she’d gotten him and Danna into.

“Toby, we really have to talk.”

“Ayah, Ah know,” he answered. “The Flaurens’ll be at Cheston in about an hour, friend. Ah’ll come in with ‘em an’ we’ll meet.”

“Alright, I’ll go break the good news to Danvers.”

“He knows,” Clover answered. “I called him using another talker.”

“Oh, well, then we just hunker down and wait until the Loreguard realize they have no chance,” he chuckled.

“I would assume so,” she answered. “I’ll see you soon, my brother.”

Kyven could only laugh ruefully as he put his talker back on his belt. His spirit had been a very busy girl, and had gone out and trapped Toby, then created another Arcan out of a shadow fox monster using Toby’s humanity...or maybe Danna’s, who knew. But either way, since Kyven and Danna were being resistant, she’d worked around them using Toby and one of her own.

Clever girl.

The Loreguard and Cheston figured it out pretty quick, when formation after formation of red-garbed Flauren soldiers marched onto the field, followed by rank after rank of cavalry, with men, wagons, supplies, and even Arcans stretched out behind them in a column that was over a minar long. But not only were there Flauren banners in that massive armies, the gray cotton flower pennant of Georvan was represented as well, and behind the Flauren infantry there were formations of gray-coated Georvans marching towards them. The Flauren field marshal, a resplendent fellow in his red coat with gleaming silver buttons, accepted a white flag of truce from a Cheston officer and a Loreguard commander, and they were informed in terse brevity that they were the allies of their attackers, and that they had better surrender *right now* if they didn’t want Cheston razed to the ground.

The Loreguard commander looked at the seething mass of humanity slowly taking the field, swallowed, and capitulated immediately. The Cheston officer wanted to be defiant, but in the end, he couldn't deny that the entire city would be absolutely annihilated if they did not surrender.

And so, Cheston fell.

The Chestoners started creeping slowly out of their burning city when the soldiers filed out carrying their muskets by the barrel and upside-down, the sign of surrender, and handed over all weapons to Flauren and Georvan officers who accepted the ranks of soldiers that marched out of the city.

Danvers held the fort, however, until a Flauren general rode up to the gates with ten Flauren and Georvan escorts and a few thousand infantry soldiers marching behind them, and hailed the lookout peering through the window of the gatehouse. Danvers was summoned, and Kyven was with him as he shouted down to the men below. "Welcome to Cheston, gentlemen!" he called down. "Do you have control of the city?"

"We have complete control," the Flauren called back. "I must admit, your reputation precedes you, General Wilson Danvers. You captured Fort Summer! I am impressed!"

"A general is only as good as his army, General," he said modestly. "Please wait a moment while we open the gates for you." He turned and nodded to the two Arcans at the winch, then he capered over shouted down into the courtyard. "Open the gates, and everyone stand down! We are being relieved!"

A cheer rose from the fort as the portcullis was raised and the doors were opened, and Danvers scurried down to the battlement, down a ladder, and met the Flauren as he dismounted his white horse. They shook hands, and the Flauren looked around. Kyven, however, didn't feel like meeting the brass, so he rounded up his Arcan friends and the Lupans and headed for the gate, to go out to Clover and see Toby. He climbed down to the courtyard, but was called over by Danvers as the general and four of the newcomers talked. "This is how we took the fort, General," Danvers said

with a smile, motioning at him. “General Irro, may I present Kyven Steelhammer, one of two Shaman the Masked sent to us.”

The four men gaped at him, and the Flauren gave him a hard, unfriendly look. “You are a Shaman?” he asked.

“Yes, I am,” he answered calmly.

“*Mei diau*,” he exclaimed. “It is impossible! You are human!”

“There are human Shaman, general,” he said evenly. “You just never see us. We’re much better at hiding than the Arcan Shaman are.”

“And Kyven here is one of the best,” Danvers said proudly. “If not for him, we would have never taken the fort.”

“How can one Shaman pull off that miracle?” one of the Georvans asked, giving him a cold look.

“Stick around, you’ll see when we reach the next town,” he said, glancing at Ebony. The men all jumped back, however, when the Lupans jumped easily down from the battlement to the courtyard, and padded up and around him and the three Arcans. “Now if you’ll excuse us, my large friends here would like to get out of the city,” he said, patting the flank of one of them absently.

“You have trained Lupans, Danvers?”

“Ah, no, those are *wild* Lupans, Colonel,” he said with a slight smile. “The Shaman can communicate with them, so they’ve been helping us.”

Kyven left the officers behind, and his three Arcan babysitters went with him as he and the Lupans padded out. There were soldiers in red or gray *everywhere*, squads at every corner, columns marching along the streets as dejected, stunned Chestoners looked on at them. Kyven and the others walked along the same route the army had taken to invade the city, then out of the ruined southwest gate.

“I’m glad to be out of there,” Fastpaw said. “The smell wasn’t fun.”

The Lupans all broke for the trees at a fast lope, and he waved them on as startled and nervous soldiers setting up camp outside the city watched them go. They also watched Kyven and the Arcans as they walked between the camps, towards the west ridge where Clover and the other half of their army was still dug in, though they were coming down to the larger army.

Kyven couldn't miss Toby at all. He padded down out of the trees and waved, and it was abundantly clear that he was now under his spirit's paw, for he really was a shadow fox Arcan. He was still tall and lean and sleek, and still had his blond braid, but now he had black fur and a muzzle, clawed hands and feet, and Arcan legs rather than human ones. He bounded down on all fours and came up to Kyven, then hugged him with a laugh. "Ayah, it's good ta' see you, Kyv!" he declared. "Look at you!"

"Look at *you*!" he countered. "Why did you let her do this to you?"

"Ah got a good deal out of her," he answered. "She was willin' ta' pay handsomely fo' this, Kyv, an' as you know, Ah do what Ah'm paid ta' do."

"I hope it was a lot."

"Ah'll never have ta' work again, friend," he grinned toothily. "After this is all over, Ah'm gonna retire."

"Well, good luck getting away from her," he said with a thin smile.

"Ayah!" he said as another figure came down the hill. It was another shadow fox Arcan, female, tall and very sleek, but also much more buxom than the usual female Arcan. She had midnight black hair that was so long it brushed the base of her tail, thick and poofy, like a wide fan hanging behind her back. She wore not a stitch of clothing, which wasn't unusual in his mind, since Umbra wouldn't either. They were both monster-born Arcans, so there were no doubt going to be some similarities between Umbra and Nightfall. "Kyven, this is Nightfall, she's mah lady," he said. "Me an' her have a job ta' do. Nightfall, this is Kyven, he's a Shaman."

"You're the other one mother told me about, the other male," she said, looking at him critically, a clawed finger to her chin. "You look like a

human, but you don't smell like one at all. But you do have nice hair."

"Thanks, and it's nice to meet you, Nightfall," He said, nodding to her. "These are friends of mine. This is Ebony, this is Striker, and this is Fastpaw."

"We protect the Shaman," Ebony declared in a strong voice.

"In other words, they're my nannies," Kyven said dryly, which made Toby laugh.

"This one don't need no protectin' 'tall, mah tall friend," Toby grinned at her. "He's all kinds o' dangerous all by hisself."

"Still, we protect him when he needs us," she said simply.

"Kyven!" Clover called. She and Ember ran down the hill, and he gave her a huge hug when she reached them. "I'm so proud of you, my brother!" she declared, licking his cheek.

"Oh sure, now you show me affection, when there's another girl around," he teased, which made her laugh and slap his shoulder. He gave Ember an affectionate squeeze of her shoulders when she reached them. "You okay, Ember?"

"I had like fifty Arcans surrounding me the whole time," she said, sticking her tongue out a little, which made him laugh.

"I told you they won't let anything within a minar of you, little sister," he grinned.

"Where's Lightfoot?" Clover asked.

"Still in the fort," he answered. "Danvers had her doing something. Where's Lucky?"

"Up there," she answered, pointing back towards the ridge. "Talking with one of the Flaurens. Come on, we have a lot to talk about!" she said, taking his hand.

“Yeah, we really do,” he chuckled, looking at Toby, who just grinned at him.

“Ah’ll tell you all about it, mah friend,” he promised. “But you look a bit tired, so come up and get somethin’ ta’ eat.”

“That sounds wonderful, I haven’t eaten since, hell, I have no idea,” he grunted, which made Ember giggle.

“Then come on. I’ll have Danvers send Lightfoot back to us, and we’ll talk over breakfast,” Clover announced.

Oh yeah, there was plenty to talk about.

Chapter 14

The ridge was a fortress.

The army had done an incredible job fortifying it in the hours after they took it, for it had a loose stone wall about a rod high, and a shallow trench was dug out behind it so men and Arcans could kneel behind the wall and fire from cover. The approach to the ridge was nothing but grass, making it impossible for them to come unseen, and the ridge itself had sea pines on it behind their forward position, allowing those not engaged in battle to rest with cover, in safety. Danvers' tent had been erected in a clearing behind some of those trees, and it was there that Clover took him. A cookfire in front had a thick stew bubbling, and a small ferret Arcan male served them bowls of it when they sat down. Kyven was starving from the long night and morning of heavy activity, and he wasted no time attacking the stew.

"Alright, Toby, how did you get here?" Kyven asked as he took a third bite.

"Well, wasn't that hard 'tall, really," he answered. "Ah took a boat from Alamar ta' Tambay, and Ah went ta' Tallasar."

"Why, though? I thought you were buying Arcans."

"Kyv, they ain't an Arcan left in Alamar," he said.

Kyven almost dropped his bowl. "You're *kidding*!"

He shook his head. "Not a single one. Anywhere."

"How on earth did you pull off that miracle?"

"Money, an' lots o' it," he answered. "Ah bought *all* of them, Kyv. Ah even bought the house Arcans out o' every house. Anyone who didn't sell,

well, they didn't keep they Arcans long. Seems some scoundrel came in the night an' stole them," he said with a slight smile. "Ah was told to strip Alamar o' every single Arcan, an' Ah did just that."

"That has to be hundreds of thousands of Arcans!"

"Closer to a million," he answered. "They tried ta' stop me when they realized what Ah was doin', but the city really couldn't. They ain't no law that says a man can't buy Arcans."

"I love the way he talks. It's almost hypnotic," Nightfall said with a smile, looking at him.

"Hush, you," he grinned at her. "Anyways, after Ah done bought every Arcan they was ta' buy, then stole the ones they didn't want ta' sell, wasn't much use for me ta' stay there no longer," he shrugged. "Ain't no Arcans comin' in ta' replace 'em. Right now, Alamar ain't got a single Arcan anywhere. By then Ah made a deal with yo' spirit, and she changed me ta' this here. It ain't so bad," he admitted. "After Ah got used ta' walkin' again and learned ta' talk right, anyway."

"What deal?" Ember asked.

"Ah owe her a little somethin' that has to do with Nightfall," he said, leering at her slightly. "An' Ah'm also what you'd call the official emissary from Haven ta' Flaur. When I showed up in Tallasar, at they capitol, they didn't take me seriously at first, but then they decided Ah was the real thing after they got in some news from the rest o' Noraam. Ah brokered the deal between Haven an' Flaur, so they know that all the Arcans go back with us, that's the price fo' us helpin' 'em. That's part o' the treaty Ah signed on behalf o' Haven. *She* told me ta' stay with the army an' help as Ah could, but that Ah'd best not get mahself kilt."

"I wouldn't like to see that either," Kyven chuckled. "I still can't believe it. Every single Arcan? It just boggles my mind."

"It sho' wasn't easy, but Ah did what Ah said Ah'd do," he said proudly. "With the others buyin' up every Arcan, they ain't no Arcans

comin' in ta' Alamar no more. Right now, all they kennels, the Blue Ring, everything, it's all empty. People ain't got no jobs, and they righteous mad, but then word reached Alamar that the Loremasters broke they word and was tryin' ta' take over the Free Territories. So now all they angry men are marching up through Georvan. Alamar is gonna fight," he said, a bit proudly.

"They're not with the army though," Kyven noted.

"They marching west of Lanna, this be too far for them ta' come," he answered. "We plan ta' join up with 'em in Carin, proolly near Rallan."

"Damn," Kyven grunted. "I don't think the Loremasters have the men to fight back against Flaur and Georvan *and* Alamar. And if the northern kingdoms decide to fight too, it'll be over. Even if it's just Balton, Mallan, and Phion."

"That's the general idea when you fight a war, brother," Clover said lightly. "Make it as unfair as possible."

"Don't talk to me about unfair, you treacherous woman," he retorted with a grin, waggling a finger at her. "You'd do my totem proud."

"It's how women get things done, brother," she winked at him.

"Wily coyote," he taunted. "So, what have you been doing to help, Toby?"

"Well, Ah still have a lot o' friends, an' Ah also have a talker that reaches back ta' the army. Ah'm keepin' in touch with Firetail. She passes on things the Flaurens need ta' know, and Ah tell them about it. They's that, and they's my new powers," he said. "Ah done learned how ta' hide in the darkness, and that makes me one of they best scouts in the night."

"Well, I can't really teach you, but I can show you what I can do, maybe you can figure it out," Kyven told him.

"Both of us," Nightfall said. "Mother said you know how to use the powers better than anyone. I want to learn more."

“Why can’t you teach them?” Ember asked curiously.

“Because it’s entirely personal,” he answered. “How I shadow walk might be different from how Toby does it. All I can do is show him what I do and describe it as best I can, and he’ll just have to experiment until he figures out how *he* does it.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense, little sister, if you think about it,” Clover told her. “Their powers are based on their strengths, weaknesses, and their perception of the world, and no two people have the same perception of the world. It is as different as we are from one another.”

“Actually, it’s based on how we comprehend the shadows and how they interact with the world,” Nightfall told her calmly. “Basically put, the better we understand the shadows, the more we can do. Now that I’m smarter than I was before, I want to learn to do more with my power, because I can understand better. Since Kyven understands the shadows better than anyone else, he’s the best with the powers.”

“Actually, I think it’s my Shaman training that helps the most,” Kyven said modestly. “Since my illusions force me to look at the world a little differently, I’ve found it works well when it comes to dealing with my shadow powers.” He raised his hand and covered shadows over it, then changed it to shadow itself. Ember looked in awe at his opaque hand. “Since I have to be able to envision things that don’t exist, imagine shapes and colors and light and shadows, it lets me envision doing something like this,” he said, stretching his hand impossibly long, as long as his forearm, with fingers that no longer moved by joints, but undulated in curves like snakes.

“What about shadow walking?” Toby asked.

“That’s a little different,” he answered. “But it was my Shaman training that let me figure it out. I really need to practice more with it. I

have the feeling that I haven't even scratched the surface of what I could do with it."

"And that's why I want to learn," Nightfall declared.

"Well, we'll have time for me to try to teach you," he reasoned. "After they secure Cheston, we'll be moving north."

"Ah told you about Alamar, so spill about Cheston," Toby pressed.

Both Kyven and Clover described the battle from their points of view, Clover from the outside and him from the inside, then when Lucky and Lightfoot joined them, they gave their views as well. Kyven noticed that Lucky sat almost in Lightfoot's lap, he wanted to be close to her, and she wasn't pushing him away. In fact, she kept a hand on his knee, almost as if she was establishing her ownership of the young cat. Toby and Nightfall seemed amazed when he described setting up the fort for Danvers to take it, how he took the turrets, then tricked them with the doors.

"That's why he's the best Shaman we could have put here, my friends," Clover said simply. "For all my power, which is considerably more than his, I simply cannot do the things that he can do. Kyven proves that it is not power, but the judicious use of that power, that is the most effective."

"No, it's because I put up with my totem," he answered.

"She don't seem all that bad ta' me," Toby said. "But then again, she didn't do the things she did ta' you ta' me, either."

"I just hope you were careful dealing with her. She's very good at taking far more out of a bargain than she gives."

"Ah had two examples of how careful ta' be, mah friend," he said seriously. "Ah was very careful. Our deal is specific. Ah give her children by Nightfall, however many she has with her first birth, and when she's pregnant, *Ah* have the choice ta' be changed back at any time Ah want. An' when she changes me back, she pays me."

"That's it?"

“More or less,” he answered. “Ah was careful to make the terms very clear. She wants shadow fox Arcans, an’ she said the breed can’t be sustained by just one pair. Deepen the gene pool, she said, though Ah have no idea what that means. What is a gene?”

“Got me,” Kyven shrugged. “I guess it means that Umbra’s kids can’t marry each other or their kids will have birth defects. Her kids need other kids to marry.”

“Ah guess so.”

“So, any luck yet, Nightfall?” Clover asked.

She shook her head. “Not yet. I’m looking forward to it,” she added, patting her slim belly. “I want to know what it’s like to carry new lives inside me.”

“So, do you change back too, Nightfall?” Lucky asked. “When Toby changes?”

She shook her head. “I won’t ever go back to what I was,” she answered him evenly. “And I’m glad. I love being an Arcan much more than I liked being a shadow fox.”

Lucky gaped at her. “You weren’t a human?” he asked in surprise.

She shook her head again. “I was born a monster,” she answered. “Just as mother changed Toby to an Arcan, she changed me. After all, we’re on opposite sides that now meet in the middle. Didn’t you know that?” she asked, and Lucky shook his head. “Arcans are half human, half animal. Well, Toby was all human, but mother made him half shadow fox, so now he’s an Arcan. I was a shadow fox, and she made me half human, and I’m an Arcan. I’m no different from any other Arcan, except I think a little differently because of how I was born. For that matter, Toby and Kyven think differently than other Arcans, because they were born human.”

Kyven had to be impressed by Nightfall’s intellect. Where Umbra was smart but just didn’t care, Nightfall was just as smart as Umbra, but she

paid attention. She was observant, and she thought critically, not catering to her whims the way Umbra did.

“A wise observation,” Clover told her with an appreciative nod.

“She always talks that way. Ah sweah, Ah can barely keep up with her,” Toby chuckled. “But Ah don’t mind all that much. She’s fun in bed, an’ as long as we enjoy that, everythin’ else will fall inta’ place.”

Nightfall rolled her eyes, which made Clover and Lightfoot grin. “Kyven,” she called. “Why don’t you smell like a human?” she asked.

He blinked. “I, I don’t know,” he answered. “Maybe it’s because I still have shadow powers, even though I’m human. Why, what do I smell like? An Arcan?”

She shook her head. “I have no idea. I’ve never smelled anything like it before. I wouldn’t know what you are if I didn’t see you, if I just picked up your scent in the forest. I think that’s why the Lupans like you.”

“How so?” Clover asked.

“His smell is, well, it’s *nice*,” she answered. “It’s, well, hard to explain.” She shook her head, causing her thick fan of black hair to sway behind her, the tips of her longest locks brushing the ground. “It’s pleasant. Attractive. If I were still a shadow fox and I saw you, I’d be afraid and hide. But then I’d smell you, and I’d be curious, and I’d come out, because your smell isn’t frightening.”

“Well, the deer are certainly afraid of me,” he chuckled.

“I’ve never noticed his scent being any different from other humans,” Clover murmured.

“Then you don’t have a sense of smell,” Nightfall challenged mildly. “He smells absolutely nothing like a human.”

“I have a very acute sense of smell, young sister,” Clover smiled. “But I think this is something we might investigate. If he smells entirely different

to you than he does to me, well, there must be a reason for it.”

“Later, I don’t want be sniffed like the next meal,” Kyven snorted, which made Lucky laugh.

“Was it really that bloody inside, Lightfoot?” Kyven asked.

She nodded. “That’s how it is claw fighting,” she answered him, patting him on the thigh. “You still want to learn?”

“Yes,” he answered immediately, leaning against her. She didn’t push him away. She actually put her arm around his shoulders.

Danvers rode up on Strider, then slid down. The Equar stepped up and butted Lucky with his snout playfully, but backed up when Lightfoot gave him a challenging stare. “How goes it inside, General?” Clover asked.

“The Flaurens and Georvans have everything under control,” he answered. “They got the fires out, and they’re searching the city for weapons. They didn’t like my orders, though. I think we’re going to fight over them.”

“What orders?”

“I ordered all Arcans rounded up and brought to me,” he answered. “Marshall DeVaur knows I’m going to free them. He doesn’t like that at all. He seems to think that the Arcans he captures are his personal spoils to sell in Flaur after he goes back home.”

“He knows he’d better not,” Toby declared. “Ah was there when his gov’ment tol’ him ta’ hand over all Arcans ta’ us.”

“Well, he seems to think he has the men to beat the Loremasters as it is, so he won’t need our help,” he said with a frown. “I think he’s seriously considering sending us away and trying to keep the Arcans.”

Kyven stood up. “I’ll deal with that,” he said in a dark voice. “Where is he?”

“In the fort,” Danvers answered.

Without another word, without even a sound, Kyven covered himself in shadow, then used it to form a gate into the shadow world. The *things* were lurking fairly close, but not close enough to worry him yet as he took a single step and pushed his power into the real world through the shadow world, creating an ostentatious cloud of shadow right in front of Field Marshall DeVaur. He used that shadow to converge a gateway back into the real world, and stepped through it even as he willed it to pass around him. He became visible in the shadows, his eyes glowing and the first thing the four men there saw as they recoiled from the cloud of darkness, and then that cloud evaporated to leave Kyven. “Marshall, I hear you don’t want to release the Arcans to Danvers,” he declared in a strong, authoritative tone.

“They will not be needed, no,” he said simply. “I have the manpower to take Avannar without them.”

“That’s too bad,” Kyven told him. “Because you *will* release them to Danvers, and he *will* free them. That is the price Haven demands for helping you against the Loremasters, the release of our people. They are not here for you to simply capture and sell to line your own pockets, DeVaur,” Kyven warned in a flat voice.

“We do not *need* your Haven to win this war,” one of the other men said dismissively. “And so, the spoils of Cheston are ours to distribute as we please.”

“Yours? Did you raise a finger to take Cheston?” Kyven exploded. “*Danvers* took Cheston, not you! If anyone’s getting any spoils out of this, it’s Danvers!”

“He didn’t hold the city when we arrived,” one of the other men stated.

“Fine, if you want to play semantics, allow me to play the most important one. Either you release the Arcans to Danvers, or I’ll have to do something about it.”

“Is that a threat, you vile creature?” DeVaur asked hotly.

“That’s a fact,” he said with a dark expression. “The Arcans are *not* assets for you to buy and sell. They are sentient beings who are unjustly enslaved. Your government agreed you before started out what was going to happen, and you either intended to commit treason against your own government from the start, or your greed got the better of you and now you intend to commit treason now. Either way, you *will* release the Arcans, and you will do it *right now*.”

“Or what?” DeVaur said with a challenging smirk. He snapped his fingers, and Flauren musketeers on the battlements lowered their muskets at Kyven.

“Or *this*,” he snarled in reply, darkness exploding all around the courtyard. Men shouted in Flauren and a couple of shots were fired, but Kyven wasn’t there to get hit. He reached out and grabbed the dandied-up Flauren commander and converged a gateway into the shadow world, and dragged him in with him. The man moaned and vomited when the vertigo of the shadow world assaulted him, but Kyven just dragged him with him as he took ten steps, each step traversing hundreds of minars in the real world, then ripped a new gateway out of the shadows and pushed him through.

Near Firetail’s Hill, Kyven and Field Marshall DeVaur stepped out of a sudden explosion of shadow. DeVaur fell to the ground, retching again, but Kyven grabbed him by the back of his embroidered red jacket and held him up. “Look!” he snapped, as Arcans stopped in their daily routines and gaped at the two humans that had just suddenly *appeared*. “Look at them, DeVaur! Look at this place!”

“Where, where are we?” he asked weakly.

“We are in *Haven*,” he answered hotly in reply. “Home to over a million free Arcans. Now *look at them!*” he said in a near shout. “Look at the buildings! See how far they go, in every direction! *Arcans built all this!*” he raged, then he whirled him around and grabbed him by his vomit-stained lapels and hauled him off his feet, holding him in midair before him. “DeVaur, you are two thousand minars from human civilization, and if I

leave you here, they will rip you to shreds,” he said with a snarl, his glowing eyes glaring up at him. “Now you are going to swear on Flaur and your mother’s soul that when I take you back to Cheston, you will order the immediate release of all Arcans to Danvers. If you do not, I will leave you here *alone*, and let you try to find your way back to Flaur. If you can get out of this city alive, and you somehow survive, you should get back to Flaur sometime around spring. And Trinity help you if you get caught up here in the winter. Up here, it falls by the rod.”

“I...I agree,” he said, coughing weakly and obviously trying not to throw up again.

“Oh, you do, do you?” Kyven asked scathingly as he again covered them in shadow, and the startled Arcans that had seen the episode play out saw the two humans vanish as abruptly as they appeared. Back in the shadow world, DeVaur’s eyes swam and he burped menacingly as Kyven marched another ten angry steps back to Cheston, then held him by the back of his jacket so he could see into the shadows. The *things* had homed in on him quickly as he moved and then moved back so close together, and they were almost visible. But they were making eager moaning sounds, sounds that chilled the blood. “Do you hear them, DeVaur?” Kyven asked in a cold whisper. “They’re the things that live in this place, and to them, we are *food*. But they don’t eat flesh, DeVaur, they eat your *soul*, and I’ve seen what they do to men when they do it. It gave me nightmares for weeks. If you lied to me, if you renege on your promise and say anything other than to immediately release the Arcans when I take you back into the real world, I will throw you in here and close the door and I will *let them eat you*,” he said in a blood-freezing hiss.

The first of them arrived, visible to both Kyven and the Flauren commander, and DeVaur shrieked in terror at the sight of the demonic, shadowy form. “I will! I will! *Mei diau*, I will!”

With a savage jerk, Kyven converged a gateway and stepped backwards into it even as he willed it around him, pulling DeVaur in backwards and letting him see that *thing* race towards him, its appendages

stretching out for him, its eager moan making DeVaur wet himself even as he vomited once again.

There was screaming when Kyven backed out of a circular disc of pure shadow, and he dragged a somewhat messy Field Marshal DeVaur out with him. Almost immediately, he covered himself with a perfect illusion of himself and separated himself from it as he built a second illusion of a beetle and attached himself to that one, much as he had done in the cutting shops in the Loremaster headquarters. He didn't want some jumpy musketeer to shoot him in the head. "Well, DeVaur? I'm waiting to hear what you say," he said, pointing at the still swirling disc of shadow threateningly. His illusion motioned, and the disc moved of its own accord, sweeping up and over the illusion's head, then settling itself not two fingers from the top of DeVaur's head, threatening to drop on him. DeVaur didn't know that the gateway was actually closed, that this was just a shadow, but it was his loss.

Guile and deceit.

DeVaur wiped his mouth with his embroidered red sleeve, giving that swirling shadowy circle over his head a fearful look. "Banarro, release all the Arcans to General Danvers at once."

"But, Field Marshall—"

"At *once*!" he barked in command.

The illusion gestured, and the shadowy disc broke up and evaporated like fog before the desert sun. "Good enough. Now keep that agreement made between Flaur and Haven in mind at all times, DeVaur," Kyven told him simply. "We will adhere to our side of the bargain. Danvers' men and the Arcans under him will fight, and fight well, but don't for a second believe that your men and your firepower gives you the right to rewrite the agreement for your own profit. As the Alamari say, a deal is a deal. We Shaman have ways of punishing those who break a deal with us. As you have seen. So long as you honor your word, you and I will get along like two kittens in a basket, DeVaur. But lie to me again, try to break the treaty

between Flaur and Haven again, Field Marshall, and you and I will be taking a little walk in a cold, dark place to discuss the matter.”

DeVaur shivered almost unconsciously as he took off his jacket, then hurriedly put it in front of himself to hide the fact that he had pissed his breeches from his men.

“Oh, and DeVaur. Never, ever have men point guns at me again. That makes me cranky. You don’t want to make me cranky.”

It was unsafe to shadow walk again, but they didn’t know that, nor did they know they were talking to an illusion. As Kyven left the courtyard through the open main gate, hidden under his illusion of a beetle, the illusory Kyven seemed to created another of those shadowy disks, then stepped through it.

Guile and deceit.

He got back to the ridge and abandoned his illusion to see Danvers sitting with his friends around the campfire, telling Toby and Nightfall a story of some sort. They all looked up at him when he approached, then sat back down and took his bowl of stew back up. “They’re releasing the Arcans right now, Danvers. Get men down there to bring them up here. And keep our army separate from them from now on.”

“What happened? What did you do, Kyven?” he asked.

“I dragged that peacock into the shadow world and threatened to leave him there if he didn’t release the Arcans,” he answered flatly. “That bastard had the nerve to have his men point their muskets at me when I demanded he keep the agreement Flaur made with Haven. He threatened me, so I threatened him right back.”

“He seriously did?” Danvers asked in worry.

Kyven nodded. “He was displaying his power. You know, we have more men, we have more guns, my dick is bigger than yours, and I dare you to do something about it. That kind of bullshit. I showed him I *could* do

something about it. Scared him into wetting his pants,” he chuckled as he took another spoonful of stew. “So, I think you should go get them, Danvers. And keep us separate from them, and be careful. I’ll guarantee the next time we attack a city, DeVaur will have all the Arcans go in first to absorb the bullets for his men, out of spite for me hurting his pride.”

“No, no he will not,” Danvers said grimly, standing up. “Let me go get the Arcans, Kyven. And all of you, spread the word that we should get ready to move out. If I can’t get a satisfying answer out of DeVaur, we will do our part on our own. I will not march under the flag of a man that I can’t trust. He can just relay his intent over a talker and we’ll go about helping them without them commanding us.”

“What will we do?” Clover asked.

“We will go in front of DeVaur’s army and make sure there isn’t a single Arcan left on any plantation, farm, or village for him to take, which also helps him by us sweeping the way clear for him. And when they get to Avannar, we take *their* Arcans as well,” he declared. “A night with you and Kyven moving through their camp should take care of it.”

“Will they let us get away with that?” Lucky asked.

“Lucky, our army moves four times faster than theirs,” Danvers smiled. “This army won’t move more than ten or fifteen minars a day because it’s just so large. It’s also not just one nation’s army. It takes time to make camp, break camp, and there are required stops to rest and to eat. I have no doubt that DeVaur and Williamson, the Georvan commander, aren’t going to agree on everything, and that eats even more time as they iron things out. With our horses and our Arcans, we will leave them in the dust. Where they march fifteen minars in a single day, we move forty, and that’s even with us stopping to free every Arcan we can find.”

“I like the way you think, Danvers,” Kyven chuckled.

Danvers mounted Strider, and the Equar pranced a little. “I’ll be back with the Arcans soon. Like I said, spread the word through our men and get

us ready to move out.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Clover promised.

They broke up and did Danvers’ bidding, first warning the command staff, then spreading out to tell the men and Arcans. As Kyven moved through the army, he discovered that the attitude of many of the humans towards him had changed. Where before he was met with outright hostility by the vast majority of the men, now they called to him or waved to him, and weren’t afraid to call him Shaman. He wasn’t sure exactly what had changed their minds about him, but he figured that his efforts on behalf of the army had earned him a little respect. The men knew that all the intelligence that they were getting about farms and villages, all their intelligence from Cheston, it came from him. He supposed they knew as well that Danvers had tasked him with the difficult mission of setting the fort up to be taken as well. The Arcans, on the other hand, seemed to have no problems with him being a human. He thought that he’d get some resistance or some issues because of it, but the Arcans didn’t care if he was human, because he was a Shaman. As his nannies moved around with him, he spread the orders, passed out quite a few blessings, and even got a few kisses from some appreciative Arcans.

What caught his eye, though, was a human soldier sitting on a barrel near a fire, sweating far more than what would be expected in the late summer heat. He had a bandage around his upper arm, which was a little bloodstained, and he didn’t look well. Kyven advanced on him without word or warning, putting a hand to his head. He had a fever.

“Hey!” the young, dark-haired soldier protested.

“You have a fever,” Kyven told him. “Why didn’t you go to Clover to have that arm healed?”

“It’s nothin’, not worth it,” he said dismissively, but a touch defensively.

“It’s infected,” Kyven told him, reaching for the bandage.

“Ay! Leave me be!” the man protested, but when Ebony put a large hand on his shoulder, leaning down to stare him calmly in the eyes, he settled down. Kyven untied the bandage and revealed a very infected wound, an injury that looked days old, the wound open and with pus oozing from the top corner of it. “What happened?”

“Tree branch clipped me,” he mumbled. “It’s just a scratch.”

“It’s badly infected, and it needs immediate treatment,” Kyven told him, putting his hand over the wound. He built the spell to cure diseases, then beseeched the shadow fox for the energy to cast the spell. The magic flowed through him immediately, purging the man of disease...both the infection in his arm and a venereal disease the man probably didn’t even realize he had. His face got back a little of its color immediately, and he looked down at his arm as a line of pus was ejected from under the skin above the wound, the abscess purging. “There, that takes care of the infection,” Kyven told him. “Fastpaw, take our friend to Clover and have her heal the cut, so it doesn’t get infected again.”

“Yes, Shaman,” the spotted cat nodded, offering his clawed hand to the man. “Come with me, soldier, I will take you to Shaman Clover.”

The man had the sense not to object, mainly because he was the smallest person there. Fastpaw was the smallest of his three self-appointed bodyguards, but that was just a relative comparison, since he was slightly taller and more muscular than Kyven.

After Kyven finished his roam through camp, he returned to the pavilion to find Danvers there, overseeing the packing of the tent. There were hundreds of new Arcans, all of them being checked over by Clover one by one, some of them in tattered field clothes, some naked, and a few of them in house servant garb. “I see DeVaur kept his word,” Kyven noted, looking up at the general, mounted on Strider.

“With tremendous prejudice,” he said dryly. “DeVaur made it clear that he doesn’t *want* us here, so we’re being good neighbors and we’re leaving.”

“Over the Arcans?” Kyven asked.

He nodded. “He doesn’t believe Arcans should be free, Kyven, and thinks they’re nothing but chattel. Livestock. He’s a slaver in heart and mind, and I will not march under the flag of a man that epitomizes everything I’m out here fighting against.”

“Well said,” Toby said as he came up with Nightfall.

“So, we’re pulling out. DeVaur’s furious that I am, says I’m breaking the agreement with Flaur, but I find that highly amusing since he himself tried to do the same thing first. I gave his second in command a talker linked to one of mine and told him that I’d tell them where I was and which way I was going so they could march behind us without opposition. I told him I’d fort up outside Riyan and wait for them there. So, in the meantime, what we are going to do is fan out and sweep every Arcan in our path up either into our army or send them into the frontier, to deny DeVaur any chance to enslave any Arcans he finds along the way.”

“Did you tell Firetail?” Clover asked.

He nodded. “She doesn’t disagree with my decision. She said I’m here, I know what I’m doing, so she trusts me to make the right decisions.”

“Good enough for me,” Kyven said. “I see I’m going to need a horse.”

“Your roan is still in the host, Kyven,” Danvers smiled. “I’m sorry to take back my Equar, but he *is* mine.”

“I need to find one of my own,” Kyven chuckled. “I’m gonna miss riding him.”

“There are some out there,” Danvers shrugged. “Search for a wild one and try to tame it.”

“Yeah,” Kyven drawled sarcastically. “And why did you raise yours from basically a newborn, Wilson Danvers?”

He laughed. “To keep him from killing me.”

“I tell you what. I’ll go find a wild one, and I’ll trade that one for Strider.”

“Ah, no,” he grinned.

“Mmm-hmm,” he hummed knowingly, which made Danvers laugh.

The advantage of their army was mobility, and that wasn’t just in how fast it moved. The men in their army were seasoned veterans who knew how to make and break camp quickly, and the Arcans learned quickly how to mimic their efficient system. Danvers gave the order to prepare to march, and in two hours, the camps were broken, the four cannons they had were packed for travel, all the gear was packed and in packs and on pack horses, and the men and Arcans were ready to go. Their sizable chunk of new Arcans had to learn how they did it, but since they had almost nothing, they at least had nothing to pack. Danvers had been wise to keep almost everything he came across as they marched south, including extra clothes for the new Arcans, and he spread out the muskets he’d confiscated from Fort Summer and a few of the alchemical devices among the Arcans to have or to carry, including the two repellers and the groundpounder, which would be very useful in when they attacked Avannar. The repellers were hitched to the backs of horses and were going to be pulled like wagons. Danvers had had his Arcans carry everything out of the fort when they were relieved just to stockpile it, but that move turned out to benefit them, since DeVaur would have probably taken it all had they left it behind. They’d taken nearly a thousand muskets out of the fort and a couple hundred alchemical weapons, a few useful alchemical devices such as four healing bells and the repellers. They still didn’t have enough muskets to go around for their new recruits, but at least they had more weapons to bring to bear.

Kyven felt a little too close to the ground as he mounted his own horse, the roan he’d named Spirit. He’d been serving the army as a pack horse since Kyven took Strider, but seemed to recognize Kyven and nicker softly when he approached him. Kyven mounted up and patted the horse on the neck, but he got a little nervous when the Lupans melted out of the trees, padding among the men fearlessly, as the men ignored them; the army had

gotten used to the Lupans that had attached themselves to the army, and to a lesser extent, so had the horses. Numb was a better term for it. They didn't panic at the sight or smell of the Lupans anymore, but when they got close, the horses got skittish.

"Woah there, it's alright," Kyven told the horse reassuringly, patting him on the neck again. "They won't bother you, boy."

He didn't settle down much, but when they started to move, the idea that he was moving settled him a little more.

As they started out, Kyven turned and looked between the trees, down at the Flauren army camped around Cheston. In a way, they represented the second half of the war that was coming. The Shaman and Haven would not stop with just freeing the Arcans they could during the war. They would demand *all* the Arcans freed, and their current allies would most certainly turn against them once that happened. DeVaur represented what was coming. He had mouthed platitudes towards the idea of freeing the Arcans captured during the war, but as soon as he was out of the eyes of his government, he decided that he wasn't going to do a damn thing Haven wanted, and that his personal enrichment mattered more than the lives of the Arcans his government had agreed to free. DeVaur represented the segment of the human population that would never see the Arcans as anything but slaves, and would fight to hold onto them, just as DeVaur had had his men threaten Kyven with their muskets when he demanded he uphold his word. DeVaur represented the enemy they would face after the Loremasters were defeated...for he had little doubt that nations like Georvan, Alamar, and Flaur, who absolutely *depended* on their Arcan slave labor to grow their cotton, grow their rice, grow their sugar, or formed the cornerstone of their entire economic system, would declare war on Haven the instant Haven demanded they release their—

Holy *shit*. If it worked for the Loremasters, why not for them?

He spurred his horse and rode up through the column to the front, where Danvers and his lieutenants were riding with Clover, Lightfoot, Toby,

and Nightfall easily keeping pace with the horses. “Danvers,” he called, riding up with his nannies and the Lupans padding up behind him.

“What is it, Kyv?”

“I think we need to change strategies,” he said. “Do you really think that DeVaur has the manpower to take Avannar without help?”

“Yes, I think he does. He’s going to take losses, though.”

“So, we can afford to send a portion of our army out and have it do something else?”

“Easily.”

“Good. You said it yourself, Wilson. The Flaurens don’t like us and what we’re doing. Is it a stretch to believe that when the Loremasters are dealt with, *they* might be our next enemy?”

“No, that’s not a stretch, my friend. What are you getting at?”

“We beat them to the well,” Kyven declared flatly. “We divide our army. Half of it goes on to Riyan, and the other half will take the mining villages back from the Loreguard. If the commanders there feel they can’t defend the mines, then they *destroy* them to deny them to the Flaurens when they march *their* armies in. After all, *we* don’t need them. If we’re going to have to deal with Flaur and the other nations that won’t give up their Arcans, we force the issue. We do to them what the Loremasters wanted to do, starve them of crystals. When the time comes, we offer a simple deal: your Arcans for crystals. One or the other. You can’t have both. After all, in just a few years, there won’t be any crystals coming out of the mines anyway. We offer to trade Shaman-made crystals in exchange for them freeing their Arcans.”

“I love how you make that offer, when you don’t have to *make* any of them, brother,” Clover teased.

“It does have some merit to it,” Danvers said, scratching his chin. “And we were intending on clearing those mining villages anyway. But we

could never hold them, so destroying the mines might be the only option. Forcing the slaveholders to face the reality that there won't be any crystals to replace the ones that die in the collars of the Arcans is an effective tool. But, I need to talk to Firetail before I make that kind of decision. This is something that Haven needs to discuss first. But I think it's a good idea," he grinned. He took out a talker, and in moments, he was talking to Firetail.

Kyven listened as Danvers explained the intent behind the decision, then what they would do. "I think it's a good idea," he surmised. "From the reaction of DeVaur, I think we need to start planning for *after* the Loremasters, Firetail."

"I don't see a problem with it, since we intended on marching our own army over the mountains and capturing those villages ourselves, as part of our strategy to take and hold the Smoke Mountains," she said. "You'll just make it happen sooner. But, you can do something else for us."

"What is it?"

"Find Kyven and tell him we need him here."

Danvers handed the talker down to Kyven, and he chuckled as he brought it up to his face. "I'm here, Firetail. What did you need?"

"Brother, the commander of the humans will not give up," she said with a sigh. "He is very clever, and. He intends to force us to slaughter his army to the last man. While all his attempts to attack our positions have failed, he's absolutely convinced that the Loreguard will send reinforcements to get him out. He will force us to slaughter his army, and that is something we will not do."

"So, what do you need me to do?"

"We believe that their army can't continue to hold on without him. So could you come and take him out of Deep River? Don't kill him, just pull him out and drop him in front of me and Danna. I think she wants to punch him in the face."

“Damn right I do!” Danna’s voice was barely audible in the background.

Kyven laughed. “It won’t be immediate,” he told them. “It’s too dangerous for me to shadow walk right now. I can come this afternoon.”

“That is fine, my brother,” she answered. “We just want this to end without a massacre, but it needs to end *now*. Even Danna believed that the humans would surrender by now, but they have not, and now their adamance is disrupting our other plans. We should have been in the western slopes of the Smoke Mountains by now, and in position to take control of them.”

“Well, I’ll come and do what I can to help, sister,” he said simply.

“Thank you, brother. I look forward to cooking a meal for you.”

Kyven handed the talker back to Danvers, and regarded Firetail’s request. It seemed that the man, Taggan Wild, was giving Danna a headache. Well, he couldn’t allow that. Nobody aggravated Danna except him.

“Who is this Firetail?” Ebony asked as he drifted back a little from Danvers.

“She’s what you might call the leader of the Shaman,” he answered. “As much as there is one. We’re actually not very organized. She sits on the council that rules Haven as the representative of the Shaman. To us, and to Haven, that means she’s more or less in charge.”

“What is Haven like, Shaman?” Striker asked.

“Cold,” he answered. “It’s far north of here, and winter comes early and buries the city in snow. But the summers are golden and warm, and the farmlands stretch from village to village south of the city like a giant stones board,” he said, remembering what he saw of it. “The whole region is populated by Arcans, but there are a few humans who live in the

southernmost village, a place called Vanguard. They were homesteaders or explorers that stumbled across the Arcans, and decided to stay.”

“I can’t imagine it,” Ebony said. “A place where there are no humans. What is it like?”

“It’s not much different than human cities,” he shrugged. “Arcans live, they work, they make things, they farm. They just live, live without fear of a slaver’s collar.” He turned his head and gestured, and built an illusion of a memory, an image of Haven as seen from one of the hills to the southwest, one of the places where he ran when he was training. It showed the city sprawling across its wide, shallow valley, gentle snow falling down upon the angled slate rooftops, designed to make the snow slide off them before it built up to the point where it collapsed the roofs, and Arcans moving about on the streets, tiny in the distance in the image of his memory. “This is Haven, as I remember it from the wintertime,” he told them. “It was cold that morning, and the snow had just started, and I looked down from the valley hillside and the air was so clear I could see all every single snowflake falling all the way to the city. It was beautiful. I think that’s why this memory has always stuck with me.”

Ebony and the boys weren’t the only ones looking at the image. Danvers and his four lieutenants were studying it with amazed faces, and Clover looked a touch wistful. “I know where you were,” she said distantly. “There’s a big spruce tree just behind you, and a big flat rock beside it that looks like a giant creature lopped the top off with an axe, it’s so flat and so smooth.”

“That’s where I was,” Kyven said, impressed.

“It’s a favorite place among many of us there. It’s called Spirit’s Table. There was an old tradition of leaving food there at the summer solstice as a way to thank the spirits for watching over us for another year, but after we had several years of poor harvests, the practice ended. They leave hand-picked wildflowers there now. It’s quite lovely, because they don’t just throw them down. They arrange them carefully.”

“I hope I can leave my own flowers if we get there,” Ebony said.

“You will,” Kyven told her. “As long as you don’t get crazy thinking you have to protect me, silly woman. As Toby said, I’m dangerous enough by myself.”

“Well, you’ll have to live with us, Shaman,” Striker said lightly.

“You three are going to find out how hard it is to keep up with me,” he said dryly. “Especially if Danvers sends me out to scout.”

“That won’t really be possible from here out,” Danvers said. “We’re not going to be traveling in a column, but in units that fan out to find and free Arcans from plantations and villages.”

“That’s not going to endear the Georvans in DeVaur’s army to us.”

“They have to catch us to stop us,” Danvers said lightly. “Even with us fanning out, we’ll still move four times faster than they will.”

“Why haven’t we started doing it then?”

“Kyven, my dear friend, look behind you. Does that *look* like our entire army?”

Kyven did look behind him, then he laughed. “Alright, I’ll give you that one. I take it they’re working behind us instead of in front of us?”

“For now, yes, because I want distance between us and the Flauren army,” he answered. “They’ll bring the Arcans to our forward camp, then we’ll redeploy into the fan pattern tomorrow.”

“I may not be back until tomorrow morning.”

“Danna,” Clover said lightly.

“Hush, woman.”

“Danna’s your mate?” Ebony asked.

“He wants her to be,” Clover teased.

“Clover, you’re going in the right direction for some payback,” he warned. “And you’ve seen what I do to people. So please, keep it up.”

She laughed. “He doesn’t get to see her often, so it’s no surprise he wants to spend time with her. She’s actually not bad at all for a human. I like her a lot.”

“She’s interesting,” Lightfoot injected, which was a surprise.

“So yes, I’ll be spending some time with Danna after I deal with her little general problem.”

“I’m not surprised,” Danvers said. “Danna seems to be very intelligent and competent, but from what I’ve heard, she’s not very experienced. A seasoned general like Tag is probably giving her some problems.”

“He won’t for much longer,” Kyven said simply. “I’ll take care of it.”

About sunset, as Firetail and Danna enjoyed a light meal at a field table set up outside her tent, the shadows seemed to swirl up. Kyven’s form became visible within the shadows, and then the shadows melted away, leaving him behind. Danna wasn’t wearing a uniform, she was wearing a simple wrap that left her shoulders bare, her blond hair tied in a tail behind her. Firetail was wearing her customary simple shirt and skirt. Danna stood up and gave him a toothy smile, then a fond hug, showing she was wearing only a little thing around her waist, almost like a torn piece of sheet tied around her to create a makeshift skirt, that was considerably higher on her left leg than her right. It came down to her right knee, but barely covered her left thigh, and rode far up her left hip where it tied at her waist, leaving her hip appealingly bare. Her tail slashed behind her when she realized he was giving her a very assessing look, then she laughed and slapped him on the arm. “Stop ogling me, you silly man,” she protested.

“But I like what I see,” he protested, holding her out at arm’s length and looking her up and down.

“What, you prefer fur over skin?” she challenged, putting her clawed hands on her hips.

“No, I prefer you, whether you have fur or not,” he answered, which made Firetail smile. “Now, you seem to have a little problem with Taggan Wild?”

“Just a little one, the man is proving to be quite tenacious,” Firetail answered. “Please, sit down and visit before you chase him down.”

“What’s he been doing?”

“Anything he can do to dig in more and annoy me,” Danna answered. “He’s attempted four separate attacks on our positions, trying to test our defenses, including a fairly serious one on our catapults.”

“I thought you had complete view of him.”

“That was before he literally built a blind to conceal what he’s doing in the north side of Deep River,” she answered. “He built it out of charred logs he scavenged when he dismantled the town, and we can’t bring them down because he’s placed all his supplies under them. We *need* those supplies. If we destroy the blind, we destroy what we need.”

“The man is very clever,” Firetail said in respect.

“Using the blind to hide what he’s doing, he’s sent out four separate probing attacks. Two were against our hillside positions, one was a probe of the river valley, and then he sent a real attack against the catapults we were using to send burning pitch down on him to keep him from getting any ideas. We stopped them all without many losses, but he’s managed to retreat back into his makeshift fort with the bodies and equipment of the men we kill.”

“How’s the supplies for us coming?”

“Very well, but we’re not letting him *see* that,” she told him. “No Arcan goes around where he can see carrying a musket. Since he dug in, we’ve been trying to bait him into making a serious attack. Well, he tried

one yesterday at sunrise, when we had the rising sun in our faces. We fought his men off when they overran a couple of our forward positions, then they pulled back when we brought muskets into the fight. Even with the muskets we're building here and the muskets coming from Haven, getting our hands on the thousands of muskets and gunpowder and equipment *he* has is absolutely critical when trying to arm an army this size."

"Why not rifles? Didn't Clover send a Briton rifle for your gunsmiths to take apart and duplicate?"

"How can she get one here, Kyven?" Firetail asked calmly.

He grunted and stood up. "I should have thought about that. Do you have gunsmiths here?"

"Yes, several," Firetail answered.

"Then I'll be right back." It was a simple matter to shadow walk back to the army, pick up a rifle, then evade the *things* on his return trip and return to the very place he'd been standing. Firetail and Danna jumped a little when a sudden cloud of shadow produced him without a sound, then evaporated around him like smoke. "Bring your gunsmiths and a couple of brothers or sisters here that can duplicate this," he said.

Firetail laughed. "I guess dinner will be delayed."

"Better have breakfast here too, cause I can't shadow walk again for a little bit. So I can't go fetch Wild for a couple of hours."

Four gunsmiths arrived, as well as five other Shaman, and they watched in rapt interest as Kyven disassembled the rifle into its components. "Do you see an problems duplicating any of these pieces?" Kyven asked his fellow Shaman.

"Can you break this housing down any more, brother? Are there any moving parts inside it?" a willowy mink Arcan male Shaman asked, whose name he didn't know.

“I think there’s a spring or two in there.”

“Then it has to be taken apart more.”

“Alright, we’re getting into the unexplored territory here. I think the gunsmiths need to take over.”

The four gunsmiths did manage to break the rifle down even more, until the steel housing had been completely gutted and every part was carefully laid out on the table in an exact pattern that would allow them to reassemble it. “Alright, this is as disassembled as it can get,” the stocky, rather rare badger Arcan declared. “Honored Shaman, can you duplicate this?”

“Easily,” a male coyote said simply. “We’ll need equal weight of metal and wood for raw materials.”

“Let’s not take any chances here,” Kyven said. “These rifles are much more complex than the muskets. I think we should duplicate them completely, to the point of using the same metals. I’m sure that isn’t steel,” he said, pointing at a pin that was part of the internal workings.

“It is, actually,” Firetail said, picking it up. “Everything here is iron or steel.

“But it’s blue.”

“That’s because it was forged differently from the rest of the pieces. Probably to make it stronger,” one of the other gunsmiths said.

“Not a problem for us, we can make our duplicates match the originals.”

“Alright, let’s make a duplicate of everything, then put the duplicate back together and see how it works,” the badger announced.

Firetail called in the materials, and the four Shaman duplicated every piece of the rifle. The lead gunsmith, the badger, then began assembling the duplicate pieces, which had been laid out right beside the originals on the

table. He used several tools, chisels and prods and tiny hammers and such, and he worked with surprising speed and very nimble hands. Once he had all the little pieces reassembled into the main components, into the field-strip pieces Kyven recognized, the badger then expertly put those back together after watching Kyven take it apart, and only having seen it once. This badger was *good*. After he locked the stock back to the housing after reinserting the firing pin and spring, he tossed it to Kyven. He caught it, actuated the cocking lever, which moved a little oddly since nothing in the duplicate had been oiled, then pulled the trigger.

The hammer snapped down on the empty chamber, exactly as it was supposed to.

“I think we have a winner,” the badger grinned broadly. “At least after I take it apart and oil it in the same places the original was oiled. You have the bullets this uses?”

Kyven took them out of his pocket, twelve of them, and the badger beamed like he was the sun.

“Remember, the brass casings holding the bullet can be re-used, and you have someone in Haven who knows how to press the bullets.”

“Tweak?” Firetail asked, and Kyven nodded.

“I know how as well, but you don’t have a bullet press here. Neither does Tweak, for that matter.”

“Can you get one?”

“Not today. We have a few with the army, so we can make our own ammunition. But I can bring one tomorrow so you can duplicate it, then take it back. We need it. Actually, I’ll have Clover duplicate one and I’ll just bring that one.”

“I think we have a plan, then,” the bull Shaman smiled. “We’ll need to learn how these work.”

“I can teach someone, and they can teach others, and so on,” Kyven said dismissively. “I’ve done it before. I can train a class tomorrow night when I come back.”

After that was done, after the gunsmiths and the Shaman retreated, talking among themselves as they took the original and the duplicated rifle to inspect and ensure they did it properly, Kyven ate a nice dinner of roasted venison marinated in an herb broth, boiled corn ears, and stewed greens with her and Danna, then he and Danna walked along the catapult clearing. Kyven couldn’t stop looking at her in her skimpy attire, and that seemed to annoy her just a little bit. “You didn’t stare half as hard when I was human.”

“I stared at you for hours when you were asleep, when you were naked,” he admitted.

She laughed ruefully. “I forgot about that,” she said. “It seems so long ago.”

“I told you before, Danna, I don’t care what you look like. Human, Arcan, doesn’t matter. You’re still *you*.”

“I think you really mean that,” she said, nudging him with her furry shoulder. “Does this mean you’ll still be there when I’m old and fat?”

“I’ll always be there,” he told her earnestly. “When all this is over, if we survive, I want to be more serious with you, Danna. Maybe even get married.”

“Kyven!” she gasped. “You’re serious?”

“As a cleric,” he answered. “I’d like to have a nice house somewhere in Haven, maybe in Vanguard so we don’t upset the timid Arcans. You can have a house near mine or maybe just live with me, hopefully, and if we do marry, you damn well better live with me. I can walk to you Haven for your meetings, I’ve learned how to take people with me now, and we’ll see if it works.”

“But...I’m not giving in to the bitch,” she said. “I may be stuck like this.”

“I don’t care,” he shrugged. “I can deal with the fur if you can. I told you, Danna, I don’t care how you look. You’ll just have to put up with one thing.”

“What?”

“I was forced to give something up to her,” he told her, a bit sheepishly.

“What?” she asked, a touch ominously.

“I owe her one more child—well, one more birth with Umbra,” he told her, a bit defensively.

She gave him a look, then did something he didn’t expect...she *laughed*. “Why did you agree to it?”

“It was that or give her your Seal,” he told her. “I went with the lesser of two evils.”

She chuckled, then sighed. “Sad that I’m laughing about you being unfaithful.”

“Well, I’m sorta not entirely faithful as it is,” he admitted. “Lightfoot can be persistent.”

She gave him a sudden look. “*Lightfoot?*”

“She doesn’t care about me being human,” he shrugged. “And I’d be afraid to say no. She might hurt me.”

Danna laughed earnestly then. “I have no idea why, but that doesn’t bother me as much as if you’d found some human whore. Arcans...they don’t see that the same way we do. It doesn’t mean as much to them.”

“I don’t think she’ll be a problem for long, though,” he said with a slight smile. “Lucky’s wearing her down. He’ll get in her bed inside two

weeks, mark my words.”

“I wish him good luck.”

“Have you been practicing your shadow powers?”

She nodded. “Wanna see?”

“Sure. Show me what you’ve got.”

They stopped, and she held her clawed hand out. She swept it in a circle, and a trail of shadow trailed behind it, until it formed a wavering circle before them. She pulled her hand away and gestured, and then the circle became a square, then it became a star, then it filled in and expanded to take on the silhouette form of a human, a male human. The figure bowed to them, then she gave him a wink. “Watch.”

She furrowed her brow in concentration, then held her hand out and clasped the hand of her shadowy creation, and then shook it. Her hand didn’t sink into the shadow. The shadowy creation reached out and poked its finger at Kyven’s chest, and it *made contact*.

She made the shadow solid!

“Holy shit!” he gasped. “How did you do that!” He reached his hand towards the shadow, but his hand passed through it.

“I sorta figured out how to make the shadow kinda real,” she answered, a bit victoriously, but she was out of breath. “It takes a lot of effort, though. I can’t make it stay that way but for about ten seconds.”

“How? How exactly?”

“I dunno. I can’t really tell you *how*, I just...do it.”

He nodded, understanding what she meant. This wasn’t something they could teach each other. He’d have to learn how to do this trick on his own, because this was something he had *not* considered. But, spirits, the possibilities. It was a trick he very much intended to learn, and *fast*.

“Have you tried shadow walking?” he asked her.

“I’ve been trying,” she answered. “I’m being careful, though. You said it’s dangerous in there.”

“It is. Just remember, when you do finally manage it, don’t hang around in there. Just come back out quickly.”

“How do I get out?”

“The same way you got in, but it’s much easier to get out than it is to get in,” he told her. “And remember what I told you about the place.”

“It’ll make me dizzy and maybe nauseous, there’s no gravity, and I can control distances with my mind but I still have to physically move if I want to move myself.”

He nodded. “And don’t practice after I leave. Not until noon tomorrow. It should be safe then.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “So, I figured out something you didn’t,” she said teasingly.

“You did indeed, my Danna girl,” he answered. “And I’m glad. Maybe with the two of us learning new tricks, we can show each other, and we both get better.”

“For as long as I’m like this. Which may be forever,” she grunted. “Cause I sure as hell am *not* giving that bitch babies.”

“I’ll find a way to make her change you back,” he promised her. “Just be patient.”

“I trust you, Kyv,” she said honestly, and that made him glad. “What happened at Cheston? I want to hear the whole thing from you, not through the reports.”

He spent nearly an hour describing everything, from his freeing the Arcans of the Pens to the battle in Cheston, and then the perfidy of DeVaur and the withdrawal of their army from DeVaur’s oversight and control. He

told her about his bargain with the shadow fox, how he'd finally managed to hold his own in a bargain, then he told her about Toby and Nightfall.

"Another brood bitch like Umbra?" she asked, amazed.

He nodded. "She's a lot smarter than Umbra, though," he told her. "She's Toby's partner, like Umbra was mine. When Toby gets her pregnant, he says he has the option to get changed back to a human at any time he chooses."

"Why would he stay like, like *this*?" she asked, holding up her arm.

"Because we're fighting a war, and *that* has definite advantages over *this*," he said, slapping his own chest lightly. "As an Arcan, he's faster, he's stronger, he can see in the dark, and he has much more acute senses. I know you know that."

"Yeah, I know that."

"I take the fur from you from time to time because of its advantages, like when I need to run very fast or I need the senses. So, he might decide to hold off on changing back until after the war's over, and hold onto his advantage. As long as he's with the army, he has no fear of a slaver's collar, and that's the only major drawback of it. As long as you don't mind the fur, anyway."

"Well, I mind it."

"Toby seems quite comfortable with it," Kyven told her. "An odd position to take for a former hunter that's been in the Arcan slave trade most of his life."

"Toby's a complicated man," Danna said. "I got to know him very well over the winter. He was the only other human around to talk to, you know."

"Nightfall doesn't seem to like him very much," Kyven observed. "Well, that's not entirely right. I think she gets along with him, but wouldn't be with him as a mate if she had a choice. I get the feeling she's with him only because *she* told her to."

“Too bad for him. Umbra’s absolutely crazy about him.”

“Yeah, I know,” he chuckled.

They talked a while longer, over little things, until well past midnight. After they returned to her tent, he kissed her on the tip of her nose, looked down towards the Deep River. “Alright, where do you want him?”

“Right here,” she declared, pointing at the ground before her.

“He might be messy when I get him here. The last human I pulled into the shadow world puked all over himself.”

“I don’t have a problem with that,” she said simply.

“Oh, here, let me take that from you,” he said, then he touched his amulet as he willed it to activate. His bones turned to icy water, and he heard her gasp slightly as she too changed, but he couldn’t really see it. After seconds, it was Danna the human standing there in her little skimpy top and tied-on cloth, her smooth skin visible on her hip, and it was Kyven the Arcan taking off his boots. She was just as sexy as a human wearing that as she had been as an Arcan. “Rowr,” he called.

She blushed, then laughed. “For some reason, I feel naked now,” she declared. “I just feel covered when I have the fur. I hope I have time to get a robe on before you get back.”

“I’ll give you a minute or two,” he grinned toothily. “I don’t want him ogling what’s mine.”

“Yours, am I?” she challenged.

“Yup. All mine,” he retorted. He then retreated into the shadows, melting away as his laughter chased Danna when she tried to smack him.

Kyven had seen Taggan Wild in person before, and it was dark, so it only took him a few minutes to find him in what used to be Deep River. They had completely torn down the village and used the materials to fortify the walls, including that blind Danna mentioned, which was a very cleverly

built array of boards and logs that covered nearly a quarter of the open space of the walled area beside the hillside. There were thousands of men inside, sleeping in tiny tents, but there were also nearly a thousand men awake. Some were standing watch, watching the forest in the night but listening far more than they were watching, but some were hard at work, digging in even more, digging a deep pit under the blind, piling the earth up against the wall to make it even harder to push the wall of logs down. Taggan Wild was asleep, in his tent under the blind, with two guards standing outside with shockrods in hand.

He loved it when they made it easy.

He converged a gateway back into the real world right behind Wild's cot, but instead of stepping out, he instead reached through it with his hands. It made his hands instantly go numb, putting them in the real world while staying in the shadow world, but they didn't stop working. He only knew he had a solid grip on Wild's nightshirt because he could see it, but he couldn't feel a damn thing under the pads of his hands. Tag was jerking awake at that touch, and he screamed just as Kyven yanked him, dragging him through the gateway and into the shadow world. Wild gasped, but Kyven didn't give him a chance to get sick, immediately turning and converging another gateway in front of Danna's tent, then throwing him through it. Wild tumbled out of the gateway and to the ground, and Kyven stepped through his gateway even as he willed it to pass around him, and Wild looked back in time to see the black-furred Arcan step out of the night itself, his eyes glowing with a steady green radiance. "What the fuck!" he gasped, looking around wildly as musket-wielding Arcans started advancing towards him.

"Did you think that the Shaman wouldn't do something about you, General?" Kyven asked calmly. "They got tired of you, so they called me. Welcome to the camp of the enemy."

"I should slap you for being such a stubborn ass," Danna growled as she came out of the tent, wearing a dressing robe, but still with bare feet.

“Danna Pannen,” Wild said, trying to recover his wits. “Another magic trick from your Shaman?”

“From a very specific Shaman with some very specific capabilities,” she said simply. “This has gone on far too long, so I called him in to deal with this. And here you are.”

“So, here I am,” he said in a calm voice, sitting cross-legged on the ground. “And what do you intend to do?”

“We’re not going to kill you,” she told him. “We don’t murder people, General Wild. You’ll be our guest for a while, then we’ll give you back to your men after they agree to surrender, and we’ll send you back over the mountains.”

“Well, that’s...generous of you,” he said, giving Danna a nervous look. “How did you pull this off?”

“A good Shaman never reveals his secrets,” Kyven said calmly.

Wild gaped at him. “*You!*” he gasped. “The black fox Shaman! Steelhammer!”

“It’s been a while since Riyan,” Kyven smiled toothily. “I was there, you know. I walked right by you as you talked to your officers.”

“They reported that you were the one that led the Arcans out of the pens.”

Kyven nodded. “That and I gave your opponent a very detailed overview of your troop placements and the best way to attack to minimize casualties and maximize the damage. That’s what I do, General. I’m a spy, and I’m not that bad at it.”

“He’s the best there is,” Danna said simply.

“So, after you turned out to be far more annoying than Danna expected, she called me in. I can never say no to her,” he said, grinning at her.

“Well, given that you pulled me out of my bed and I landed right here, on my ass, I can see why you’re a good spy,” he said with a rueful chuckle. “Some kind of magical movement?”

“Something like that,” he said evasively. “Now, we’ll see how long your men last without you, General, wondering if they’re the next one to disappear.”

“What do you mean?”

“Can’t you hear them?” he asked with a mild smile. “There’s yelling and confusion down there. Your guards probably *saw* me yank you right into nothingness, saw you disappear. They’ll wonder what happened to you, then after a little while, they’ll start wondering who’s going to be next. Eventually, they’re going to break, and then they’ll surrender.”

“My lieutenants know what to do.”

“Then I’ll just go get *them*,” Kyven shrugged. “If I have to fix it so the only guy in charge down there is a squad corporal, well, that’s no problem. But, if you shout down to them to surrender, things may go a little quicker.”

“I won’t do that.”

“I figured you wouldn’t, and I can respect you for it,” Kyven said, looking down at him with a nod. “But, there’s nothing stopping *me* from doing it for you, after I give your men some time to panic,” he said with a smile, taking on the illusory image of Taggan Wild, perfect to the minute detail. “I’ll just show up falling out of another of those shadowy clouds, act shaken, isolate your lieutenants when they come to me, get them out of the way so no one can reject my commands, then order your men to surrender. By the time the truth gets out, they’ll already all be disarmed.” Wild gaped at him, then gave him a sudden angry look.

“Barktoe, take the general here and find him some clothes that fit him, then put him in the prisoner’s tent. Make sure he’s treated well, but watch him very carefully. He’s extremely dangerous,” Danna ordered one of her guards.

“At once, General,” the burly canine said, pounding his fist against his chest, over his heart, in a curious gesture that looked almost official. “Shaman,” he said with a respectful nod, holding his hand out to the seated man. “Sir, if you’d come with me, please,” he asked.

General Taggan Wild, his legs bare to the thigh, was escorted off by one of Danna’s guards. Kyven and Danna looked at each other, then they burst into laughter spontaneously. Kyven came up to her, then he ended his time wearing her fur. They both endured the icy change, and she shook herself as he rubbed his forearm vigorously, waiting for the goosebumps to fade. “So, you still wearing that sexy outfit under that robe?” he asked her in a husky voice.

“Oh, don’t *even*,” she laughed, pushing him away. She laughed even harder when he grabbed the edges of the robe and tried to pull them apart, and she slapped his arms a couple of times. That didn’t dissuade him, so she gave him a wicked smile when she put the point of one of her claws below his belt, pointed up, in a *very* sensitive place. Kyven froze instantly when he felt that point dig into his crotch, then slowly, carefully put her robe lapels back down, then even smoothed them out. “That’s better,” she said with dancing eyes. She removed her claw, but gasped and laughed again when he reached out and grabbed her in a rough hug, pinning her arms inside the circle of his own. “You’d better behave,” she warned.

“I don’t want to behave,” he whispered close to her ear. “I want to drag you into your tent and see if we can both fit on your cot.”

“Like *this*?” she protested.

“I told you, I don’t care about *that*,” he breathed, sliding his hands up and down her back. “I was having sex with girls who look like *that* before you met me. It doesn’t bother me at all.”

“It bothers me,” she told him.

“Does it?” he asked, barely more than a whisper, sliding his hands down and cupping her shapely butt in his hands.

“Yes, it does. And you’re a pervert.”

“Oh, I’m a pervert, am I? Who screwed me *knowing* I was the one wearing the fur?” he asked, caressing her posterior. And she didn’t push his hands away.

“I didn’t feel it. You didn’t look it.”

“But you knew it was there,” he pressed, and she jumped slightly when he put a hand between them, on her breast, over her robe. “Admit it.”

She pushed back and gave him a strange look, mixed with indecision, desire, and not a little fear. Then she looked around and realized that Kyven was pawing her in a very intimate manner out in the open. Her cheek fur ruffled in what had to be an Arcan’s blush, and she looked at the guards, who were pointedly looking away from her, trying not to smile. “Let’s discuss this in private, mister,” she said in a hostile tone, grabbing the hand on her breast firmly by the wrist.

“Oh yes, let’s go somewhere private,” he agreed as she yanked on him as she dragged him into her tent. Her tent was actually rather spacious, with two large chests, a weapons rack for her musket, pistol belt, and other weapons, and a table that had maps strewn across it. She also had a cot, which had a mattress on it, and looked fairly sturdy if not very roomy.

He was here, he wanted her, and he was going to do his damndest to get her into that cot.

It turned out, however, not to be nearly a tenth as hard as he expected. The second she got him into the tent, and the flap fluttered closed, she crushed him against her, her claws digging into his back painfully. “Damn you, Kyven,” she growled at him. “I don’t know what to do with myself now!”

“Do what you want, Danna,” he breathed in her ear.

Her tail shivered visibly as his breath washed over her ear. He reached down and between them for the belt of her robe, and she did not protest

when he pulled it untied, then pulled hard at one side of it, pulling it open. She was wearing her little top and tied cloth under the robe, but that wasn't much. He reached underneath the skimpy top and put his hand solidly on her fur-clad breast, then kissed her on the side of her muzzle. "Kyven," she said in a low voice, then she literally growled in her throat. "Kyyyyyv," she complained as his massaging of her breast started getting to her. "I, I don't know what to do."

"Anything you want," he answered, pushing her towards the cot, even as his other hand reached under her robe and started picking at the knot holding the cloth around her waist.

She was hesitant, but not because she did not want him. She was hesitant because she was an Arcan, and she was extremely self-conscious about it. He sensed that the first thing he had to do was prove to her that *he did not care*. That wasn't hard at all, since his ardor was in full boil, and his passionate touching of her replaced what would have been passionate kisses between them were they human. He knew enough about Arcan females to understand how to convey his passion through touch, through her heightened sense of smell, even through her tongue. Arcans licked because their lips were not shaped correctly nor were prehensile enough to kiss the way humans did, but their tongues were sensitive. When she opened her maw slightly, he kissed her lower jaw, and she licked at the side of his face before she realized what she was doing. He pushed the robe from her shoulders, finally picked through the knot on her little cloth wrap, and they both fell to the floor as he tried to get enough separation from her to pull her little top off. "Kyven," she said breathlessly, standing there in flustered confusion. "I...I don't know what to do."

"You can let me get this top off you," he said urgently. She blinked and looked at him, then obeyed, holding her arms up as he pulled it over her head. Once he got her naked, got to see all her white fur, he pushed them both towards the cot. She surrendered to his ardor, allowing him to lean her back on the cot, and she winced when her tail got caught between her butt and the side pole of the cot, even through the mattress. She got her tail safely under her, trailing down between her legs, and he was careful not to

knee it as he joined her on the narrow cot, kissing her fur under her chin, then kissing the end of her nose, showing her that he wanted her, and he wanted her *badly*. She responded to that passion uncertainly, no doubt finding that her feelings and what she was feeling was a little different with the fur, and that made her hesitant. But that didn't stop her from pulling up on his shirt, then running her clawed hands under it, along his lean torso.

He didn't give her time to worry too much about it. He worked his trousers off in a bit of a display of needful dexterity, and he lay atop her, letting her feel his weight, letting her feel his erect member between them, pressing down against the crown of her pubic bone. She accepted him when he pressed down on her, his head beside hers, her hands sliding up over his shoulders, and he winced when those claws suddenly punched into his skin when he mounted her. He found that she was as ready for him as he was for her, and she flexed her fingers a little as he fully penetrated her, digging those points into his skin enough to draw blood.

"Uhh, Kyven," she gasped in his ear. "I don't know what to do."

"Let me love you, silly woman," he breathed back. "And try not to flay me."

She actually laughed, and the clawtips removed themselves from his shoulders.

She wasn't hesitant for long. Both of them had searing memories of their first episode of lovemaking, and it was probably those memories that incited her into letting him seduce her this time. Kyven found that even though it was her wearing the fur this time and not him, it was no less intense, no less unbelievably pleasurable. Danna responded to him in ways no other woman ever had, and he found himself responding to her the same way. She wrapped her arms around him and moved with him as he made love to her, moving with him in ways he found incredibly erotic. She sure as hell knew what to do once she shed her inhibitions and surrendered to her passion, and her need, the feel of her against him, around him, the hot breath against his hair, the almost sinfully soft fur sliding against him in

ways that were exquisite, the soft fur clashing with the erect nipples poking against his chest, the hard, sharp claws that raked down his back, the teeth that suddenly clamped against his lower neck and upper shoulder, her tail spasming and slashing between his knees. They were lost in their passion, him thrusting into her with growing need, and she met him with yearning resolve.

Then, she gave a startled gasp, and her claws drew significant blood when he felt her clench. He had enough experience to hold still as she gasped and growled and bit at him in the throes of her passion, and just like any other Arcan female, her clench against him incited him to a powerful, intense, almost mind-shattering orgasm. He winced in both ecstasy and pain as he gave his seed to her, and her claws dug deep furrows in his back.

She gave a choking sound, then panted breathlessly as he collapsed atop her, her claws still dug under his skin, and he could feel either sweat or blood sliding off his back and down his sides. He nuzzled at her neck and the side of her head, panting himself, then he slid his hands up her sides and along her arms, and gripped her elbows. “Danna,” he whispered.

“Mmm?”

“You can take your claws out of me now.”

She gasped as she released him, and he felt the unmistakable oozing of blood from the bottom edges of those deep gouges. “I’m, I’m so sorry,” she said worriedly, which made him laugh.

“Nothing a Shaman who’ll ride me over for a week for it can’t heal, my Danna,” he told her. “But I need get up before you get bloodstains on your mattress.”

“Nooooo,” she complained, lacing her fingers through his and pulling them over her head. “Don’t move. Not yet.”

“Did you like it?”

“Fuck,” she panted. “I’ve never felt...what was that?”

“Something female Arcans do when they orgasm. I assume you liked it?”

“I’m ruined,” she told him. “It won’t seem even interesting as a human.”

He laughed, then he gripped her clawed hands sensually, and kissed her again on the side of her muzzle. “I’m glad you enjoyed it. And I’m glad you let me.”

“I’m not dead, Kyv,” she told him. “I still want you. You put your hands on me, and, and, I just lost myself.”

“And now you know, I don’t care what you look like, or if you have fur or not,” he whispered in her ear. “Because it’s *you* I want, Danna. You. Not what you look like. I want *you*.”

“I’m...I’m starting to believe you,” she said.

“Oh, *now* you believe me? After I just seduced you and ravished you?”

She laughed. “After I clawed you up and you didn’t stop,” she told him.

“I’ll take the scars,” he said dryly, which made him let go of his hands and wrap her arms around him again. She ran her hands over his scratches, which was painful, and when she pulled them off, she had blood on the pads on her palms and fingers.

“Holy Father, I’m so sorry!” she gasped as she stared in horror at her bloody palms.

“It was worth it,” he said immediately and with complete conviction as he rose up off of her, then went over to the tent flap. He opened it and looked out. “Could you please summon Firetail?” he asked a guard. “If you have to wake her up, do it. Tell her I need to see her.”

“Of course, Shaman,” the guard answered, hurrying off.

“Holy shit,” Danna gasped as she sat up.

“What?”

“You’re bleeding!” she told him.

“I think we established that, love,” he answered lightly, which made her give him a flat look. He turned a chair around so he could sit in it with the back in front of him, leaning on it and giving her a light, playful smile. “I told you, it was worth it.”

“We shouldn’t do this again,” she said, looking at him. “I really hurt you, Kyven!”

“This? I’ve had worse from Lightfoot,” he snorted. “And just *try* to not do this again when I know how to get you into that bed, you silly woman,” he winked. “I’ll just have to put bags over your hands or something.”

She gave him a hot look, then exploded into laughter, flopping back onto the bed.

“Kyven, what did—oh my,” Firetail said as she entered the tent, wearing absolutely nothing at all, which was normal for her since she slept unclothed, then she took in the situation and smiled knowingly. “Danna, my dear friend, try not to grip and pull next time,” she chided. “Grip, fine. Pull, fine. But not both.”

Danna gave her a sheepish look, but Kyven just looked over at the Shaman matriarch with a dry expression. “I’d rather not face a week of cheeky comments, Firetail. Could you fix it please?”

“Why Kyven, you of all people know that I’ll ride you twice as hard about this than the others,” she grinned at him as she stepped over.

“But I know where you live, Firetail,” he countered. “And I’m not worried about offending you if I get mean in response.”

She laughed delightedly as she put her hands on his gouged back. He felt the angry buzzing in his back as her Shaman magic healed the scratches, leaving his back smooth and unscarred, if still bloody. “I’ll get a rag and clean you up, my friend.”

“I’ll do it,” Danna said, standing up without bothering to cover herself. “I owe him that much.”

“I’ll leave him to you then, my friend. Good night.”

“Night, sister, and thank you.”

“Any time, my brother. Any time,” she answered as she left the tent.

Danna cleaned the blood from his back with a rag, and spent a lot of time tracing the pads of her fingers along his skin, touching him, feeling him with her heightened senses. Then she leaned down and touched her nose to the back of his neck, under his black hair. “Kyven,” she called.

“Yes, Danna?” He shivered slightly when she licked the back of his neck slowly, sensually. He bowed his head and let her do what she wanted, as she literally tasted his skin. Her hands came to rest on his shoulders, as her tongue tasted the skin behind his ear. “Should I ask the guard for some bags?” he asked.

She collapsed against his back in laughter, wrapping her arms around him. “You are an evil, insensitive prick, Kyven,” she told him.

“Then I’m doing it right,” he answered her flippantly, putting his hand on her forearms. “It’s how I keep you on your toes.” He felt her press against his back, her hands sliding up and down his chest and side, and was keenly aware of the swell of her breasts pushing against him. “Well, I’m glad I was intending to stay the night,” he told her as she started licking him under his jaw from behind, easy for her to do since her muzzle was over his shoulder.

It wasn’t nearly as urgent the second time, and also didn’t involve asking Firetail to be healed. Kyven was the one that surrendered this time, allowing her to explore him with her fingers and tongue, as he had no doubt she was comparing what she was feeling to what it felt like when she was human. After she was done exploring him, she led him back to the cot by the hand, and to keep from gouging him with her claws, she allowed him to guide her down onto her hands and knees. He then made love to her again,

his hands roaming all over her as he thrust himself into her, but as they went on, he moved with more and more intensity, more passion, and more speed. They ended with her pulled hard against his chest as he shook her entire body with hard, almost violent thrusts, as her claws kneaded the air in front of her and she pushed the side of her head against his as he pushed his chin over her shoulder, her tail curling around his hip and the tip lashing at his buttocks as it slashed back and forth in her pleasure. He held her tightly against him as she clenched, and that action incited him to another powerful orgasm, holding on for dear life as he survived their shared pleasure.

She pulled him down to the bed after they were done, holding him close and with her muzzle up against his neck, nuzzling him in a nearly Arcan manner. “Kyven,” she whispered breathlessly, her breathing still fast, pushing her breasts against him with every inhale. “Don’t think this changes anything.”

“What’s there to change?” he asked. “You’re mine. This just proves it.”

“So sure of yourself,” she countered. “I may just be interested in your body.”

“Such a bad liar,” he teased. “You love me. Admit it.”

“Like you’ve ever said it yourself!”

He rose up and looked down at her. “Danna,” he declared, “I love you. And I’m not just saying that because I just made love to you,” he said with a wry smile.

She laughed helplessly. “Really?”

“Really,” he answered, kissing her nose playfully. “I think I’ve loved you since somewhere in midwinter in Haven, I just wasn’t sure until after I started this insanity. Master Holm always did say that love wasn’t something you knew you had until well after you had it. And every day that goes by, it just convinces me that much more that coming back to you is the best thing waiting for me when this war is over.”

Her eyes softened, and she pushed her hand through his black hair over his eyes. “You go a long way to get into my pants, Kyven.”

“It’s worth every step,” he grinned down at her.

“I appreciate the effort,” she winked at him.

“So, I’ve bared my soul,” he prompted.

“My mother told me that the instant a man hears you admit you love him, he stops trying. But,” she said playfully, putting her hands behind her head. “I think you’re the kind that’d lose interest if I didn’t say it.”

“I don’t want to hear you say it, I want to know you mean it.”

She smiled at him, sliding her leg up and down against his hip, sliding her sinfully soft fur against his outer thigh and hip.

He laughed. “Yeah, that’s proof enough for me,” he grinned down at her. “You wouldn’t let just anyone make love to you like *this*.”

She pulled him back down against him. “Kyven Steelhammer, *I love you*,” she breathed in his ear. “And what I won’t give to that bitch, I’ll give to you.”

“Kits?”

“Babies,” she said, pushing at him. She saw his playful smile, then laughed and pulled him back down. “We’ll find some way to make her change me back, then we’ll have babies together, Kyven. Lots of them. On our little farm just outside of Vanguard, or maybe on the outskirts of Haven, if they’ll let us.”

“You’re the general of their armies. I’m a Shaman. They’ll let us,” he told her, settling against her. “So, wanna get married?”

“*After* I get my humanity back,” she told him. “I’m willing to do this with you, but no way are they tying a marriage cord around our wrists with me this way.”

“Just more motivation for me,” he said, lazily kissing the base of her jaw.

“And I expect a proper proposal. You dressed in your best, coming to call at noon, kneeling down, giving me the four flowers of love, a ring and a necklace, the whole thing.”

“I’ll be happy to when the time comes.” He settled a tiny bit more against her, feeling drowsy. “Danna.”

“Mmm?”

“I love you,” he breathed, then he fell asleep.

She just held him, held him for a long time. She never thought that despite her being trapped by that bitch, being stuck in this body, she could ever feel so...*wonderful*. She held him closely and tenderly, hearing him breathe, feeling it against her chest, and feeling a strange electric thrill in her to know that this enigmatic, handsome, frightening, powerful, wonderful man *loved her*, and she loved him, and she could be the luckiest girl in Noraam. She reveled in this newfound bond of expressed love between them for long moments in the dark, until she too fell asleep.

Outside the tent, hidden from the eyes of all, the shadow fox sat sedately with her tail wrapped around her legs. Her unwavering, unblinking, glowing green eyes were fixed on the tent, and they were content.

Finally. She was starting to wonder if she was going to have to do something drastic to make them admit the truth to each other.

But, it would spur her Shaman to new levels of cunning and trickery to try to wrest Danna away from her...which would be a source of diverting entertainment for her.

She stood up and turned, then padded away, content with the fulfillment of plans set in motion seasons before. But that was her way. Slowly, patiently, planting the seeds and nurturing them until they

blossomed into the flowers of her intent. She was a spirit of guile and deceit, but she was also a spirit of cunning, vision, and patience.

Seeds sown long ago had finally born fruit. But there were other seeds to be nurtured, and they needed her attention before they too could come to harvest.

Her body seemed to merge with the shadows of the night, and then she was gone.

Chapter 15

He was less than a ghost in the night.

There was a time when he would have marveled maybe a little bit at himself running at almost full speed through the forest with just a whisper of sound, low to the ground, his hands and feet barely making contact with the ground as his tail acted almost like a rudder, gently guiding his direction. He weaved through trees painted with the steely light of the full moon, darted almost right through a herd of deer who barely took note of his presence until well after he was gone, his body dissolving and reappearing as he passed through shadows cast by the canopies of the trees above. There was a feeling of power in his body, the strength in his muscles, the iron-like durability of his heart and lungs, the almost supernatural endurance of the Shaman, among the fittest living beings in the entire world. He could run at that speed for hours, almost days, could run a horse into the ground, could kill any man that tried to match his pace within twenty minutes.

Kyven Steelhammer stopped in a small clearing and put his nose to the grass and wildflowers, testing the many scents left behind. The need for the nose was most of the reason he was borrowing the fur from Danna, gaining a sense of smell that, while not the most acute out there, was far better than his human senses and was sensitive enough to smell what he was after. He was hunting, and he had a very specific prey in mind, which was why he'd passed up on the herd of deer. Eyes attuned to the night scanned the trees when he heard a faint rustling, but it was just a possum. There was a fox behind him, skulking about in hopes of an easy meal of whatever he might kill and it could steal, and a pack of wolves were about a minar to his north, moving away from him. But they didn't concern him. He was hunting bigger game.

Much bigger game.

He finally found it, the smell he was looking for. It was fairly fresh, less than an hour old, from where the herd had passed through the clearing. This prey wasn't afraid to walk through clearings and farm fields, because they were bigger than everything else and much meaner. Everything in the woods with the exception of maybe a Tauron gave them a wide berth, because they were cantankerous, ornery animals possessed of an impressive mean streak.

And he was hunting them down.

There were ten Equars in the herd, he thought. Maybe nine, maybe eleven, his skill with tracking by scent wasn't as good as Clover's. He darted off into the trees, leaving the disappointed fox behind, again racing through the woods, sliding through undergrowth, avoiding blackberry and bramble patches, and scaring the life out of a bobcat that he almost ran over, jumping the animal and sending it fleeing away from him with a yowl of fright. He ran for about ten minutes, following what was now a fairly obvious trail of broken branches and churned up ground from their hooves, then slowed down when he could smell them even as he ran. He skulked along the shadows, his body vanishing into each one, until he reached another small clearing that had a small river bisecting it, and he saw them.

Eleven of them, massive horse-like animals with fanged teeth. Equars. They were led by a truly monstrous mottle-coated stallion, his coat a mix of reds, browns, and whites, with a single black patch that enveloped his left ear, making it black while his other ear was red. He was a good rod taller at the withers than the next largest Equar, with a powerful barrel chest and hooves almost covered with shaggy fetlocks. This wasn't just a big Equar, this was an old and cagey Equar, who had probably ruled his herd for many years. Kyven looked over the others, eight mares and one other stallion, a stallion that looked to be at about that age where the dominant male would drive him off.

He assessed them. The two stallions...no. Neither of them would work. The lead stallion would be too hard, the young stallion too much of a serious fucking problem if he took it back, given that Strider was already there. He inspected the eight mares, ruling out five outright as too old, then carefully studying the three young mares. He wanted the strongest of the three, and going by sight, the biggest of them would be the one. The biggest, however, looked far too aggressive judging by how she behaved in the herd, being very bullying even with the older, larger Equars, so he took a good look at the second largest, a charcoal gray Equar with black spots on her rump and a single patch of black on her left shoulder, just under her mane. She turned towards him and sniffed at the air, and he saw that she had a broad chest and powerful legs, definitely an outstanding specimen, as well as being more alert than the others. She was looking in his general direction, meaning she was the first to take notice of him.

Nightfall was right. Clover, other Arcans, and animals all smelled him to be what he appeared to be, right now as an Arcan, but monsters smelled him entirely differently. The scent of an Arcan should have provoked a response, probably a predatory one since Equars were omnivorous, but the mare was just snuffling the air with her ears picked up in a relaxed, almost curious fashion. She had never scented anything like him before, and as Nightfall had said, his scent was not threatening to them.

The other Equars started looking around, their ears up, sniffing at the air. The lead stallion pranced a bit, unsure if his strange smell was a challenge to his dominion over the herd, but none of the other monsters were moving in a hostile or aggressive manner.

He touched the amulet and willed the change, and felt his bones turn to icewater as his body changed. He stood up and stretched a little, shivering away the last of the cold sensation, then girded up his courage and stepped out of the shadows. The lead stallion took immediate notice of him and brayed, then jumped the entire river and stormed up to him. Kyven held his ground, making no sudden movements, but his heart did leap a bit when that humongous animal was towering over him, over twice his height at the shoulder, his head a good 16 rods off the ground. Sirra and Dauro would

look like puppies compared to this massive brute, and they were the size of a large pony...and they were the *small* Lupans in their pack. The alpha male in the pack was the size of a horse and towered over Dauro.

The Equar didn't trample him or bite his head off, thank the spirits. It stomped up to him, snuffling and prancing, but Kyven's scent wasn't threatening to the animal. It didn't mean that the Equar particularly approved of him being there, but his non-threatening smell saved him from being stomped into ground meat and then eaten as a midnight snack. "Easy boy," Kyven called in a gentle voice, raising his hands. "Easy. Easy." The Equar gave him a challenging look, but Kyven met that stare with calm eyes, neither weak nor aggressive, eyes that simply *were*. "I'm not here to fight, big guy. I am here to try to lure one of your mares away, but it's for a good cause," he said in a quiet, gentle voice. The stallion sniffed at his head, then his bare chest, then butted him with his nose and knocked him to the ground. He didn't try to squirm up and away when that huge head filled with sharp teeth came down and snuffled at his stomach, then his hip, feeling his hot breath wash over his exposed penis and testicles, an irrational thought that the Equar might bite his equipment off fleeting through his mind. He clamped down on such things, for thoughts like that might cause him to fear, and that was something that an Equar could smell. If he showed fear, this monstrous Equar might kill him out of reflex, out of instinct. He felt exposed with no clothes, but he didn't want any stray smells at all on him when he did this. These Equars might have had run-ins with people, and the smell of cured leather, cotton, or steel might have provoked them.

The stallion finished his inspection and snorted, then clomped off and waded through the stream to return to his herd. The herd looked at him, but then went back to drinking. Kyven breathed a sigh of relief and got up, brushed a little dirt off his bare backside, then slowly approached the water. The herd stared at him when he knelt down and got a drink himself, but they didn't react when he stepped into the water and slowly approached. The lead stallion had approved of his presence, such as it was, so the herd was allowing him to approach. He slowly approached his target, who

regarded with curious eyes. He came up to her through the river and reached his hand out to her, and much as he was hoping, his scent made her more curious than afraid or angry. She sniffed at his hand, and flinched back only a little when he put his fingers on her nose, stroking it gently. "That's right, I'm not going to hurt you," he crooned to her, stroking her muzzle, then patting her on the neck. Her head was well over his, and she looked down at him with honest interest, liking his attention. The other Equars milled around the water's edge as the lead stallion drank, giving him time to stroke her slightly shaggy coat, her long, coarse mane, and her powerful shoulders. She looked at him when he stepped down to her foreleg, looking at her side and legs carefully. She was *powerful*. Her legs rippled with muscle as she moved, and her chest was broad and dense, all corded muscle. This Equar had definite power, and since she was an Equar, it meant that she also had stamina, durability. She was also younger than he expected, her head and face still carrying a trace of coltish youth.

"You're definitely the girl I came here to find," he told her. "Now comes the part where I convince you to leave your herd and come with me."

He knew Strider, so he knew how to do it. He put together an illusion in his mind that *only* had smell, beseeched the fox for the power to cast it, then felt her respond. The illusion was focused around his hand, and it was the smell of honey. Honeyed bread was something that Danvers fed to Strider as a treat. It was the honey more than the bread that Strider liked, so it was the smell of honey that he used to lure the mare away from the herd. Only she could smell it, so she was the only one that responded to the illusion, looking at him with interest and taking a step towards him. He slowly and carefully walked backwards, and she followed him, her ears up and her eyes bright, incited by the smell of a rare treat. "That's it, girl, come with me," he said in a gentle voice. "I promise that you'll get plenty to eat."

Kyven was very careful. He led her into the trees as the other Equars bedded down for a rest, knowing that he had to convince her to leave her herd even as he had to get her away before the lead stallion came looking for her. Stallions didn't like to let their mares get too far away. He moved faster and faster, inciting her to follow with the smell of honey, getting

distance from the rest of the herd. He led her off a goodly distance, then he stopped and dismissed the illusion.

Guile and deceit.

She looked at him suspiciously when the smell of honey faded, but she again responded when he stroked and petted her, liking his attention. He led her to a maple sapling instead and watched as she started to crop it—it was because they were sweet, he'd figured out—and used that opportunity to shadow walk back to camp, pick up the seduction kit, then quickly get back to her before she lost interest and went back to the herd. The *real* smell of honey got her interested again, but this time he could back it up with a large platter of honey soaked bread. He fed it to her piece by piece, almost getting bitten a couple of times, then fed her apples and sweet oats. "That's good," he crooned to her. "So, what do you say, girl? How'd you like to come with me? I could use a good Equar like you, I got totally ruined by riding Strider. You'll get lots to eat, another Equar to get to know, and a couple of Lupans you can bully when you feel peevish."

Now came the test. He stepped away from her, walked away a few steps, then looked over his shoulder at her. She flicked her ears, obviously trying to decide between the apple in his hand over going back to the herd, and then she trotted up to him.

"Good, good," he crooned, giving her the apple. "Now, follow me, and you'll get lots more apples," he urged, walking back towards the camp.

She paused, looked back towards the clearing where her herd was, then trotted after him.

Danvers was going to have a heart attack when he saw Kyven bring *her* back to camp, but he was the one that gave him the idea in the first place. Danvers had told him to go get his own Equar, and after getting used to riding an Equar, he did just that. Spirit was a good horse, but it just wasn't the same, it was like moving from a mansion to a shack. There wasn't that feeling of *power* there was when he rode Strider, knowing he was riding an animal that could run all day and all night, an animal that

wasn't skittish in a battle and could fight for itself if it came to blows. After riding an Equar, a horse just wasn't enough.

The Equar followed him for nearly an hour, occasionally needing some reinforcement with strokes and pats, until he got her back to the edge of the camp, where Patience was waiting. Patience was one of five Shaman that had braved the dangerous journey and had come to the army to help. He'd taken them all at once, literally tying them together with a rope, shadow walking them all into the shadow world, then leading them back to the army. It been an experiment as much as it had been necessary, and he'd learned that moving so many people through the shadow world at once made it *extremely* dangerous. The *things* in the shadow world found them before they took five steps, and Kyven had to again resort to trickery to get them the rest of the way and back into the real world. He turned his ability to control shadow against everything around him, creating a solid shield of power that encased them and turned the creatures away. They surrounded his shield and tried to get through, and very nearly did, cracking a hole in it as he split his attention to converge a gateway back into the real world, and he very nearly got caught kicking their butts to get them through the gate and literally diving through it himself right before he got himself impaled by a spear-like tentacle. He wouldn't do it again, but he'd learned that he could take more than one person with him, and he'd gotten five more Shaman to the army to help out. Patience was sitting on a log, knitting in the light of a little glowing globe that hung over her shoulder, humming to herself. The gray tabbycat Arcan looked quite content, and he wasn't surprised to hear her purring. "Patience," he called in a low voice. The Equar looked at her and snorted, but when she scented the Arcan, her ears went back and she bared her fangs menacingly. "Easy, girl, easy," he called softly, patting her shoulder. "She won't hurt you."

"I won't hurt you," Patience called in a strange voice, a voice that made the Equar's ears pick up. "My goodness, brother, you weren't kidding."

"Would I do that, sister?" he asked lightly as he patted the Equar's neck, and having to reach up to do it. "Can you talk to her?"

“I already am, brother,” she smiled. “Come here, my big friend,” she beckoned, holding her hand out. The Equar almost trotted up to her, snorting. “Now, let me explain a few things, my large friend,” she said in that same strange voice, stroking the Equar’s muzzle. “My brother brought you here in hopes that you would travel with him, brought you to me so I could explain it to you. He wants you to aid him by carrying him on your back from place to place, and in return, he’ll make sure you are well fed and get plenty of attention. You’ll find him to be a very good friend. So, what do you think?”

The Equar was still a moment, then pawed at the ground and gave a short whinnying-braying sound.

“She agrees, but she wants a lot of honey,” Patience told him lightly.

Kyven laughed, picking up his pants that Patience was minding for him. “If she has the nerve to bargain, she’s just the Equar I was looking for,” he said, patting her flank. “Tell her I agree.”

“He agrees,” she told the Equar. “Now, let me explain what we’re doing. We’re traveling with many humans and Arcans and horses, which is our herd, and we are moving from one place to another place, to protect our territory. This means that we are fighting against another herd that seeks to take it from us. Since you are joining our herd, are you alright with helping us? We don’t need you to fight, but we wanted you to understand that there will be fighting.”

She gave an ominous growling bray, a sound he’d heard from Strider more than once.

“Good, I’m glad you do. To let you know, my large friend, the humans and Arcans and horses are our herd, so we don’t eat them. I understand you might be a little skittish around them at first, that you’ll need to get used to the idea of being around them. That’s fine Your new friend will also make you something that he puts on your back so he can ride on top of you without falling off, as well as a bridle to place around your muzzle to give

you signals which way you need to go. He'll make it as comfortable as he can."

She gave a noncommittal snort.

"I know, but you don't want him falling off and hurting himself, do you?" Patience asked lightly. "After all, he's just a baby."

"You're walking on dangerous groooo-ouunnd," he sang menacingly as he buttoned his pants. The Shaman that were there still rode him about catching drinking sickness.

She laughed. "Oh, he was making a joke. Our kind does joke and play, so feel free to play as well," she said with a sly smile at him. Now, you must meet his other companions, so you know that they are not your enemies." She turned her head. "Sirra! Dauro!" she shouted. Seconds later, the two Lupans melted out of the woods, their dark fur mixing well with the shadows of the night, only their glowing amber eyes giving them away. "These Lupans are also his friends, and they will be part of our herd. They will not try to eat you, you will not try to eat them. Do you understand?"

She pawed the ground with her foreleg.

"There are four other Lupans in our large herd as well, but they don't travel with him. They won't bother you," she added. "Now, come with me, let me show you the herd."

Kyven just followed as Patience led the Equar out of the clearing and towards the camp. This was one of her specialties; she was so adept at communicating with monsters that she could talk almost any monster into doing what she wanted. She'd even brought Wolverans into the Arcan army, something only four Shaman could do. Where Clover could only talk to other canines, Patience could talk to any monster, and she could be *very* persuasive. Her talents would be generally wasted here, since Danvers didn't want too many monsters mixed with skittish Arcans, but if they did cross paths with a monster while on the move, Patience would be here to smooth things over and prevent any unnecessary fighting. Kyven felt that

was a good policy Danvers had. They didn't really *need* any monsters in the host, and they could be more trouble than they were worth if the presence of monsters upset the Arcans. He followed along beside them as Patience led the Equar through the camp, introducing her to fire, showing her what humans looked like up close, showed her Arcans, and pointed out the other four Lupans to her when they came close to where they'd bedded down for the night. She pranced a little when they got close to the center of camp, and Patience chuckled. "Yes, there's another Equar here, my friend," she said. "He is friends with the lead stallion of our herd, and carries the leader around much like Kyven wants you to carry him around. I'm sure you and the male Equar will be good friends," she said, patting her on the muzzle.

Sirra and Dauro weren't the only ones to follow along with him. His nannies also showed up, getting introduced to the Equar and then following along as they continued to tour the camp. Ebony told him about what had gone on while he was off hunting for Equars, about the nearly 200 Arcans that they'd freed that day. After four days of steady northern movement since leaving Cheston, they'd taken in nearly 1,600 Arcans freed from plantations and villages, which were now in the army. Most of them wanted to fight, and Danvers' wise stripping of the Cheston armory was working in their favor now. Muskets that had been weighing down pack horses were now being carried by Arcans, and the other Shaman were duplicating Briton rifles whenever they had the chance.

They were doing the same over on the other side. He'd trained some Arcans in using a Briton rifle and now the Shaman were producing them as fast as they could, as well as the bullet press that Clover had duplicated and Kyven had delivered. Danna was also now on the move, because the Loreguard army that had been dug in at Deep River had surrendered yesterday morning, and again, Kyven was why. He went back down there disguised as Taggan Wild with a story about being released, then painted a grim tale to his main officers about there no chance of escaping Deep River or getting help from outside. The illusory Kyven surrendered the Loreguard army, and not a single man in it gainsaid him. And to their credit, the Arcans did exactly as they said they would do. They disarmed the soldiers,

let each of them keep a pack with his possessions and enough food for ten days, then marched them back towards the Smoke Mountains. They returned Wild to his men just before they marched out, where Firetail told him in front of his army that they were letting them go home on the condition that they never came back. Firetail had wanted to Seal them so they could never return, but the Shaman were just too busy with everything else, so they just let them go.

Kyven wasn't so sure about that. He understood why they did it, that it was against Arcan way to slaughter the helpless, but Wild was going to run straight to the Loremasters and tell them exactly what was coming. If the Loremasters used that to try to rally the northern kingdoms into a combined effort against the invading Arcan army, it might backfire on them. But, those kingdoms wouldn't believe that Arcans could be that organized until they saw it with their own eyes, so at least the human view of the Arcan was going to work in their favor in the short run. Danna's army was actually in front of Wild's men now, since they moved much faster, and while Wild marched his men northwest, straight for the Cuman Gap, the fastest way back to Avannar, Danna's army was moving due west, and had already broken up and spread out to occupy every possible overland route through the Smoke Mountains that would accommodate an army with wagons. Since the southern kingdoms weren't a current threat, they were focusing on the northern passes, the Cuman, the Blue River, the Gray, and the Toka passes in the Free Territories, Mallan, and western Phion, with scouts equipped with talkers heading for the passes further north and the passes in Carin and northern Georvan, just in case someone tried to sneak an army around them and hit them from the flanks.

One thing was for sure...there was no turning back now. Wild had seen the army, and now he was on his way back to Avannar to warn them of what was coming. He might already be there, if he left ahead of his men and about rode his horse to death getting there.

Patience ended the tour at Kyven's camp, which was right beside Danvers' tent. The other four Shaman were there with Clover and Ember, sitting and enjoying a meal in the early night. Tallspan and Dancer were

there, the wolf and red fox he had met before, but the lanky young cougar male named Redclaw and the extremely petite little ferret female named Quick were Shaman he didn't know. Redclaw was very tall and heavily built, having earned his name through his hunting prowess, always having blood on his claws. Quick really was quick, dazzlingly fast on her feet and with reflexes so fast and sharp she was almost frightening. Both of them were Shaman like Stalker, Shaman who trained more for fighting than the others, and were well suited for service in an army that was going to see a lot of fighting. Lightfoot and Lucky were also there as well as Danvers, who was sitting on a log in the middle of the Shaman, eating dinner. Danvers gaped at the Equar they led up to the fire, then he laughed delightedly. "I should have known!" he said. "No, you can't have Strider, Kyven, I won't trade him."

"I'm not going to, this is *my* Equar," he replied evenly. "I need to give her a name, though. She didn't think much of Dusky."

"I wouldn't either," Dancer said lightly.

"She?" Danvers said in sudden interest

"I didn't think bringing another male with Strider around was a good idea," Kyven chuckled. "They might have killed a few people with their constant scrapping."

"We really need to talk, Kyven," Danvers said animatedly. "If you could lure another female Equar here, we could get a breeding pair, and—"

"Save it for after this is over," Kyven chuckled, patting the Equar on the side of her neck. "Lucky, here's your new project."

"I hope this one doesn't bite," he said, looking at the Equar steadily.

"No idea," he said with a slightly ominous smile. "I don't know much about her yet outside of the fact that she seems to be very smart."

"Oh, she is," Patience agreed, tracing her fingers along Sirra's flank as the Lupan padded past her. She and Dauro laid down at the edge of the fire.

“I’m going to need a saddle and a bridle for her. See what you can find.”

“I don’t think we’ll find anything that’ll fit her,” Lucky fretted. “The only saddle that might is Strider’s.”

“We can alter a saddle so it does,” Tallspan said calmly. “So just find a saddle and bridle, my young friend. We’ll take care of it.”

“Works for me. Alright, Patience, let’s get her settled in and explain the way things run around here, and we can deal with the saddle and such in the morning.”

“Alright, my brother.”

They walked her to the stables, and right to the large corral that held Strider. Along the way, Patience explained some of the happenings that went on around camp, explaining the singing and the fires and the smells to the young Equar, pointing things out, and basically explaining things so she didn’t get skittish surrounded by people and Arcans. When they reached the corral, they were careful to introduce Strider to her since Equars could be hostile to rival herds, but that turned out to be a moot point. Strider was overjoyed to have another Equar about, and the young mare seemed to take a liking to him. They were prancing about in the corral, playing with each other when the two Shaman left them. They chatted on the way back, Patience continuing to subtly tease him over getting sick, which earned her a swat on her rump. He left her at the fire, however, continuing on, walking out of camp, and returning to the clearing where she’d been waiting. There, he took off his clothes again, centered himself, then started practicing.

He hadn’t yet figured out how Danna did it, and he was *going* to find out. If he could make shadows solid, well, the possibilities just tickled him like a feather duster. He started with basic shadows, creating a cloud around his hand, manipulating it into shapes, then he moved on to practice the trick he knew that Nightfall wanted to figure out, taking on a shadow form. He infused the shadow into his entire body, becoming a silhouette, a shadow without depth that could be seen through, felt the shadow pulse through him

like blood, pushed by the beating of a phantom heart. He contorted his body in impossible ways while in the shadow form, almost tying his arms in a knot. He then bled out the shadow and concentrated it into a sphere before him, peering deep into it, *feeling* it in the core of his soul, becoming one with the shadow before him. He tilted his head slightly and had it take on the shape of a thick walking stick that was as tall as he was, complete with a gnarled, flared tip, then he tingled shadow through his fingers and reached out for it, *willing* that shadowy shape to have solidity.

And for the hundreth time, his hand passed through it.

He just *had* to figure this out. It wasn't that he couldn't stand Danna knowing something didn't, it was that this could be unbelievably useful to him. He knelt down, going over and over what he remembered when Danna did it, using his highly trained mind when it came to memory and imagination, critical aspects for a totem Shaman of the shadow fox, a Shaman that dealt with illusion. The curious tilt of her head, the look of concentration on her face, the fact that she couldn't make it solid but for a few seconds. She said it was extremely taxing, it tired her out quickly, so that meant that he had to invest a great deal of effort into it.

Well, so far he hadn't felt anywhere near that kind of effort.

He practiced for nearly two hours, failing again and again, but doggedly persistent, far beyond when he should have stopped because he was getting tired. He could sense the shadows after working with them for so long, *feel* them all around him, almost feel like they were an extension of him. It was something he felt a lot after prolonged practice with the shadow powers, a kind of sharpening of the connection that faded afterwards, but something he had taken note to explore.

He got his energy back after the brief rest, contemplating the many ways he had failed so far. In that respect, he was as much a Shaman as any of them, for he learned from his mistakes and grew from them. Eventually, he knew, he was going to succeed if only because he ran out ways to fail. He never tried completing his goal the same way twice, trying different

mindsets, different approaches, different ways to try to ask or lure or manipulate or goad or force or intimidate the shadow into cooperating.

Guile and deceit. Had he tried *tricking* the shadow yet?

He stood back up and formed a ball of shadow in front of him, and then again shaped it into a walking staff. He centered himself on it, looking deep into the shadow, feeling every mote of it in his body, and then he *tricked* it. He tricked it into thinking it was real, convinced it that it wasn't just a shadow, that it was something else. He invested all of his willpower into it, almost gritting his teeth with the effort, the same effort he threw into an illusion that he wanted to intrude a great deal into reality. It was his training with illusions that he threw at the shadow, investing such a sense of *real* into the shadow in front of him, he was trying to trick the shadow into believing what he was throwing at it. He was trying to force his own concept of reality onto the shadow, where the shadow was a solid object, tricking it into believing it was something more than what it was. He reached out quickly, reached for the shadow, and he almost flinched when his hand closed over a solid object.

He'd done it! He quelled a whoop of joy and held his shadow staff above his head in victory, but just like Danna, he found out in short order that forcing the shadow to intrude into reality. It taxed on him to hold the shadow in that state, and after only about thirty seconds, he could barely see from the effort, like stars in his eyes. He let go of it with an explosive breath, then leaned over with his hands on his knees and panted. Dear spirits, that was like running a hundred minars! It was like weaving an illusion the size of a mountain! His respect went *way* up for Danna that she could hold that for ten seconds or so, given that he was far better conditioned than she was and only managed twenty seconds more.

Like any skill, it was important to repeat it, become adept at it, so as soon as his strength returned, rather quickly, he did it again. He again made the shadow solid, then a third time, and after resting, then he started analyzing how he was doing it, trying to figure out *exactly* what he needed to do so he could save his energy, only expend what he needed to expend in

order to pull it off. He tried and failed multiple times to invest only so much energy into it, different levels of deception, until he managed to narrow down exactly how he could go about making the shadow real without overexerting himself.

Of course, by then he was almost completely exhausted. Working with shadows wasn't as demanding as Shaman magic, it was more like a series of short sprints rather than a prolonged run, but after enough sprints you got just as tired as you would be with the running. He sat down on the log that Patience had been using and got his breath back, felt the weariness in his arms and legs, then heard someone approaching. He glanced back to see Nightfall padding up, her white fur on her belly and chest almost glowing in the light of the full moon, and she stepped over the log and sat down beside him. "Were you practicing?" she asked.

He nodded. "I learned how Danna does it," he told her, a bit triumphantly.

"Really? Good! Now I need to learn," she said. "I still can't turn myself into a shadow like you can."

"Just keep working at it, you'll get it," he replied. "You're very smart, Nightfall, it won't take you long."

"Thank you. I just wish *he* could see that, and not just these," she said archly, motioning at her breasts.

He laughed. "Toby knows you're smart, he just thinks *those* are more important," he told her. "How goes it on the pregnancy front?"

"Not yet," she replied. "I can't deny that it's fun, though. Toby is vigorous."

"He's a good man. I'm glad he's here."

"I've seen him fight," she mused. "I see what the mother sees in him. He'll be a fine sire for my kits."

"When did you see him fight?"

“In Tallasar. A city man got angry with him and drew a shockrod. I never thought he could move that fast,” she mused.

“Toby’s nasty, alright,” Kyven chuckled. “I’ve seen him fight, too. Oh, by the way, you were right,” he told her. “About my scent.”

“I knew I was right,” she said simply. “After all, your smell is right under my nose.”

“The Equars agreed with you. None of them tried to attack me. They were a little curious, and the lead stallion didn’t exactly like me at first, but they didn’t see me as threatening. They let me walk right up to the herd after I gave them a little time to get used to me.”

“I don’t suggest trying that with an aggressive monster, like a wild Lupan,” she chuckled. “They may be too intent on eating you to care what you smell like. Well, you could, but you’d have to approach the right way.”

“Yeah, I can see what you’re talking about there,” he nodded. “And I think Equars could be classified as aggressive,” he laughed. “You’ve seen how Strider acts.”

“He’s a bit mean-spirited when he plays, but not overly aggressive,” she corrected. “But that might be General Danvers’ work with him to take the aggression out of him. Are you going back to Danna tomorrow?”

He shook his head. “They’re on the move now, I don’t want to distract her while she’s getting close to human territory. More the pity,” he chuckled. “She’s been quite frisky since she realized I love her no matter what she looks like. Besides, I’ll be needed here. We’re about to cross back into Carin, and Danvers might need me to scout. And there’s always the Loreguard garrison in Rallan to worry about, they might cause us problems. They’ve got a lot of men up there, and if they try to attack us, we could be get bloodied up in a hurry.”

“He’s asked me to scout as well, primarily at night. For obvious reasons.”

“You’d be good at it, they’d certainly never see you,” he chuckled. “Are you used to moving around in your Arcan body now?”

She nodded. “I practiced a while, and I’ve been hunting for the army. Killing deer isn’t much different than chasing squirrels, except they’re bigger compared to me, and the deer don’t run up trees.”

He laughed. “That would be something to see,” he mused.

“Learning how to walk on two feet after the mother first changed me was more challenging than I thought it would be,” she noted. “It seems a clumsy way to go about it.”

“Keeps your hands free, but I still find myself prowling around on all fours when I’m wearing the fur. You’re right, you feel much more stable and mobile when on all fours.” He gave a rueful little laugh. “It wouldn’t work for the humans. Their back legs are too long. They’d look extremely silly if they tried.”

“They. Their. You’re human, but you talk like you’re not one of them.”

He gave her a look, again impressed by her observation and her intellect. “I am, but sometimes I feel like I’m not. Anymore, I feel like I’m both a human *and* an Arcan, and when I’m with one group, I call the other *they*.”

“You are, but you’re not. You and me, Toby and Danna, Umbra too, we’re something different now. We look like them, but we’re not like them. We’ve all come from someplace different, but we all think alike. We all know what it’s like to be something else.”

“That’s pretty profound.”

“It’s simple. We have shadow powers. They don’t. We came from somewhere else. They didn’t. We think differently than they do, we can do different things than they can. But that also means that we go about things differently than they do, because of what we used to be.”

“Well, that’s one way to look at it,” he mused, leaning down with his elbows on his knees.

“Will you do something for me?”

“Sure.”

“Take me into the shadow world,” she said calmly, looking him in the eyes. “I want to see what it’s like.”

“It should be safe enough, and it might be useful for you to know what to expect when you figure out how to do it yourself,” he reasoned, slapping his knees and standing up. He held his hand out to her, and she took it and stood up, the tips of her curved, wickedly sharp claws touching lightly on the back of his hand. He gestured in front of himself, creating a whirling disc of shadow, and condensed it down and used it to converge a gateway into the shadow world. “Do not let go of my hand, no matter what,” he warned. “In there, you could take a single step and be so far away I’d never find you before *they* do.”

“Alright,” she said calmly.

“Alright, get your stomach under control, and let’s go.”

He stepped into the shadow world and pulled her along behind him, and the vertigo of the place attacked him just as it did everyone who came here. However, he was almost used to it now, and it barely effected him. He didn’t see the swirling chaos anymore, he saw shapes, patterns, images of the real world within the shadows. The stomach-churning weightlessness of the place also didn’t effect him, since he’d experienced it enough to be able to control it. Nightfall, however, gave a dangerous heave and wobbled a bit, blinking her eyes owlshly. “You weren’t kidding,” she managed to say. “It’s cold here, too.”

“It’s not that bad,” he replied. “Look out there, Nightfall. Try to look *though* the shadows and the clouds and the swirling and see the shapes behind them. You can see anything in the real world cast in shadow from in here, and here, your mind controls distance and direction. You can take a

single step in here and go a hundred minars in the real world, but you can walk all you want and not move an hair from where you're standing unless you *will* yourself to move."

She tried to walk, and she indeed did just walk in place, as if the ground were moving under her to keep her in one place. "I...I can smell something unfriendly," she said uncertainly, looking around.

"It's *them*," he said, sensing their approach, attracted by the opening of the gateway. "They're trying to figure out where we are. They can't sense us unless we do something that alters the shadow world, but since I altered things when I made the gateway that brought us here, they have a general idea of which direction we're in. They'll wander this way until they get close enough to find us, feel our warmth. We have a few minutes yet before we have to leave, and we'll have to wait before we can do it again, since they'll know where we are. They'll lurk here for a while, hoping we show up again."

"I remember," she said, for he'd educated both Toby and Nightfall in the shadow world, telling them everything he'd learned about it so they were better prepared than he was when he finally learned how to do it. He'd also fully explained it to Danna, because Danna was actively trying to learn how to shadow walk. For someone that hated what she was, Kyven was quite surprised at how much Danna practiced her shadow powers...and he didn't mind a bit. Those powers would make Danna extremely hard to capture, and he'd rather not have to invade the Black Keep to go get her, if they didn't execute her on the spot. She hated the fur, but she loved the toys.

He remained quiet for a several moments, letting Nightfall look around and get used to the place, but he kept an almost iron-like grip on her hand. If she separated from him and catapulted herself off to who knows where, he may not find her before *they* did. "I can sense their...I don't know. Hunger," she said, shivering. "They're not friendly, are they?"

"Not one bit," he replied. "They'll attack us the instant they figure out where we are. And I'm surprised you haven't thrown up yet," he said

lightly.

“I’m no weakling,” she replied playfully. “It was bad at first, but it lessens as you get used to it.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, sensing that they were getting closer faster than he expected. “And it’s time to go,” he told her, turning and motioning, converging a gateway back into the real world. “You take us this time. Remember, you have to *will* yourself to move even as you *do* move, or you’re not going anywhere,” he reminded her.

She nodded, then knitted her furry brow in concentration. She took a step towards the gateway, getting it right on the first try, and she pulled him into the gate and back into the real world. He released the gate, which evaporated like smoke in the moonlight, and saw that Nightfall looked almost gleeful...which wasn’t much. She was a very self-controlled young lady, not given to excessive emotional outbursts. She was the exact opposite of Umbra in many ways. She had the same emotions, she just didn’t advertise them to the whole world like Umbra did. He let go of her hand and sat back down on the log, and she did the same. “Thank you.”

“Hey, you had a good idea. I’ll need to take Danna in there the next time I go see her.”

He escorted her back to camp as they talked, basically smalltalk, but that smalltalk just reinforced his conclusions about her. She was highly intelligent, analytical, and observant. He’d also learned that while she liked Toby as a friend, she wasn’t all that taken with him as a lover. Oh, he gave her pleasure, that wasn’t the problem, he just wasn’t her type. She’d been all over the camp for the four days she’d been there, asking anyone she could find everything she possibly could before she aggravated them, and had found a way to sit in with Danvers while he talked with his top officers. She was *learning*, and she was learning at a fast pace. He returned to his tent and campfire, which was also the camp of his close friends, all of them with their tents pitched in a little semicircle. All the Shaman were there, Toby and Nightfall, and Danvers’ tent was just behind them. Most of them

were in their tents now, sleeping, but Toby and Ember were sitting by the fire with Ebony and Striker, and Sirra and Dauro were still sleeping soundly at the edge of their fire. “Shaman,” Ebony said respectfully as they approached. “Did your practice go well?”

“Very well,” he smiled. “I learned a new trick today.”

“Ayah, yo’ makin’ the rest of us look like slackers, Kyv,” Toby chuckled.

“You wouldn’t be so far behind if you practiced more,” Nightfall told him just a bit archly.

“Danvers said that he wants to talk to you first thing in the morning, Shaman,” Ebony relayed. “He got some information from his scouts not long after you left to practice, then went back to his tent right after telling me that.”

“I’ll bet it’s Rallan,” Kyven grunted, sitting at the fire. “We’re only a few days from there, and there’s ten thousand Loreguard garrisoned there. I tricked our army past them once, but I doubt they’ll fall for that again. We might have to fight.” He tapped his finger to his jaw. “Hmm. Maybe I should go pay his Majesty another little visit.”

“Who?” Toby asked.

“The King of Carin,” he replied. “Alak Longwell. I’ve talked to him once before. I’m kinda curious to see what he’s up to. He’s a rather clever young man, and I want to see what decisions he’s made with the information I gave him.”

“What did you tell him?” Nightfall asked.

“Everything,” he shrugged. “He was my window into the other monarchs, because I’m sure that everything I told him managed to find its way to every other throne room. The monarchs talk to each other. I told him all about the crystals, the Loremasters, and Haven, then told him he had to choose how to lead his kingdom in the changing times to come, when all

the Arcans are gone and there's no slave labor to tend their crops. I'm curious to see what he decided to do. That, and I need to go take a look at the garrison in Rallan. Danvers is going to need some solid intelligence, and well, that's what I do." He yawned. "I'm going to get some sleep. Ebony, tell the night watch to wake me up three hours before dawn. I'm going to go drop in on Alak before he gets his day started, so I have time to be back here in time to talk to Wilson."

"I'll see to it, Shaman," she replied with a nod.

Alak certainly had good taste.

The attractive little Anna wasn't the one sharing his bed when Kyven stepped out of the shadows and into his bedroom, this time it was a copper-skinned beauty with black hair, a Nurysian Cajar by the looks of her. Longwell and his new plaything were asleep, and through spirit sight, Kyven could see that his two guards stood just outside the door. The bedroom was exactly as he remembered it, and much to Kyven's surprise, a half-empty bottle of wine sat at the table he'd occupied the first time he'd come here. He sniffed at its top, then couldn't resist pouring himself a glass. Longwell had good wine, and this wine was no different. He put his feet up on the table, making himself comfortable, then glanced lightly at Alak Longwell, king of Carin, who had a pistol pointed at him, moving swiftly and silently and proving he was exceptionally light sleeper.

"Good morning, your Majesty," Kyven said easily, taking a sip. "You're looking well."

His voice brought the two guards barreling in from the hallway, muskets in hand and pointed at him. Longwell called them off with a sharp bark of command, which made them look at him in some confusion. "You're slipping in your old age there, old boy," he said smoothly as he lowered his pistol.

Kyven shrugged. "I didn't think it important to hide myself this time," he replied.

"Return to your posts," Alak told his guards. "Shel, relax, this man isn't a threat. Are you?"

"Not today," Kyven replied, taking another sip. "Maybe someday in the future I might be, but not today."

The guards looked hard at him for such a statement, but it just made Longwell chuckle. "The truth in the lie, or the lie in the truth?"

"I'll let you figure it out," Kyven answered smoothly. The guards left the room and closed the door, and Longwell put his pistol on his night table. "Since you're here, pour me a glass," he said, swinging his legs out of bed. "Why don't you get dressed, Shel? I think me and my mysterious friend might be engaged for a while."

Kyven poured Longwell a glass of wine, and the king joined him at the table. The woman, Shel, darted behind a screen, then reached out and pulled her dress off the floor and behind it with her. "So, what brings the human Shaman back to Rallan?" he asked, which made the girl gasp behind the screen.

"I'm here checking on the Loreguard garrison. I decided to come have a talk with you before I go down there."

"Well, they're not here," he warned. "They marched out of Rallan two days ago, heading east, towards Hattar."

"The whole garrison?"

"Every man they could find, along with my own army, as well as quite a few conscripts they pulled off the streets," he said with a dark scowl. "They conscripted honest Cariners. The message I sent to the Loremasters just barely managed to relate my outrage at that maneuver."

"So, the spanking they took at Cheston has them riled," Kyven chuckled.

“I heard some rumors, my men brought me some reports. Did Arcans really take the city?”

Kyven nodded. “The Arcan army took the city, then held it until the Flaurens and Georvans arrived. Cheston never had a chance. The city fell in a matter of hours.”

Longwell frowned, then he laughed ruefully. “You said they were more than I thought they were,” he admitted, taking a drink. “And you were right about my plantation owners being very angry when your army moved south.”

“Well, they’re on their way back north,” Kyven said honestly. This wasn’t anything Longwell didn’t already know, given he told him what the Arcans would do the last time he was there. “And there’s about a hundred thousand Flaurens and Georvans right behind them, with a few dozen or so thousand very angry Alamari marching in hard from the southwest.”

“They just passed Lanna,” Longwell told him, taking another drink. “It seems the entire south save Nurys is against the Loremasters.”

“And you?”

“Walking a very fine line,” he replied. “The Circle already more or less told me that if I resist the Loreguard in any way, they’ll free up my throne for someone more tractable,” he growled. “They pressed my army into service under the Loreguard’s banner, and now they’re kidnapping able-bodied men off the streets to fight, a clear violation of the treaties.”

“I warned you.”

“So you did,” he nodded. “Everything you told me was true, Shaman. What they were up to, what they would do, even what they might do. For that much, at least, I thank you for your warning. My people can’t resist the Loremasters, but we’re not going to really help them either. My men already have their orders. We let them do what they need to do, and we resist in every way we can that won’t cause them to attack *us*.”

“And your army?”

“That’s a bit murky,” he frowned. “They can’t resist or they’ll be shot, so they have to go along with the Loreguard. My officers are still loyal to me, however, so they’re sending me reports. They’ve been ordered to dig in about fifty minars east of Rallan, forming a defensive line.”

“They’re trying to hit the army as it moves north,” Kyven grunted. “Are your men in any position to rebel?”

“My army of six thousand outnumbered over three to one? No,” he answered. “Vetters!” he called. One of the guards opened the door and looked in. “Bring me my troop placement map,” he ordered.

“At once, your Majesty,” he replied, closing the door.

The handsome young lady came out from behind the screen, in a low-cut dress without any petticoats or undergarments, so it hung just a little loose on her. “Well, Shaman, I think you should meet my fiancée, Sheldra Tremonde.”

“Nurysian? Well, that explains why you’re so lovely,” Kyven said lightly, lifting his glass to her. Nearly half of Nurysians had that coppery hue to their skin, part of their heritage being from a human peoples not originally native to Noraam. They were called the Cajar. It was said that most Cajar Nurysians’ ancestors were from Fria. “So, the notorious bachelor king finally got caught, eh?”

Sheldra gave him a light, challenging smile. “*Oua*, he was no match for me,” she said in that charming accent. “Ze men, zey cannot resist a Nurysian lady.”

“That and Nurysians see nothing wrong with a mistress on the side,” he chuckled.

“His *or* mine,” the girl stated, which made Longwell laugh. “Marriage, it is for politics. Fun, it is where you find it, no?”

“Are you saying that Alak’s no fun, Sheldra?” Kyven asked lightly.

“Oh, he is *very* fun, but he works long hours, and a lady like myself, she can get very lonely,” she said, reaching into her sleeve, pulling out a short stick-like object, then snapping it out to reveal a lacy fan and waving it before her face delicately. Nurysian ladies were famous for those fans, both as a fashion symbol as well as a weapon. Virtually all Nurysian women had several fans on their person, each one decorated differently or made of different materials, and one was almost always made of very thin steel plates with razor-sharp edges. And they knew how to use them. The fact that Nurysians were, on the average, a little taller and stronger than most other people helped the ladies defend themselves that much more when outside of Nurys, because within Nurys, a woman was as safe as safe could be. No Nurysian man, no matter how desperate or criminally minded, would ever *dare* lay a harmful hand on a woman. It was generations of tradition. The women carried their fans as defense against other women, because no man would ever do her harm. After all, in a society as politically murky and decadent as Nurys, there had to be female assassins to kill the female nobles, since a man wouldn’t do it.

“What can I say, I like the way she thinks,” Longwell grinned.

“*Oua*, he said you are the human Shaman?” she asked, sitting at the table and continuing to fan herself.

“Yes, Shel dear. He’s visited once before. I told you about that.”

“I did not think it possible. *Jesui deaux*,” she murmured.

“Get used to seeing it, because I won’t be the only one,” Kyven said simply. “Times are changing, Sheldra, and humans being Shaman are just a part of it.” He poured her a glass of wine and handed it to her, and she took it with a smile.

“Pay attention, *mon avor*, this one, he has ze manners of a gentleman,” she said tartly to Longwell.

The guard returned with a rolled-up map, and handed it to the king with a short bow before leaving the room. Longwell unrolled it and put it on

the table, using the wine bottle and the four unused glasses as weights on the corners. It was a fairly accurate map of the kingdom of Carin, which was something of a wedge sandwiched between the Free Territories and Georvan. It was wider on the east than the west, occupying a lot of coastline that was actually too dangerous to sail due to barrier islands, treacherous currents, and notoriously fickle weather. But, that was also a defense against a seaborne invasion. "Alright, my officers tell me they're dug in right here," he said, pointing at the map along the road between Rallan and Hattar, some twenty or so minars past the ruins of Rallan's once sister city, Durm, before it was destroyed completely by fire and had never been rebuilt because of the catastrophic loss of life. It had happened a hundred or so years ago, and it had been so terrible that barely a thousand survived the disaster. The survivors had never returned to rebuild, moving to Rallan, and now the area around Durm was considered cursed, with few inhabitants. That had been where Danvers had taken the army, down the path of least resistance. "The Loreguard has a defensive line nearly twenty minars long, holding most of their troops right in the middle so they can deploy to any part of the line, and they're expanding it in both directions. Give them enough time, and they'll have trenchworks dug reaching from the ruins of Durm all the way to Hattar. They've brought more Loreguard troops in from the Free Territories, hijacked my army, and they're kidnapping any man old enough to hold a musket and pressing them into the army. They have nearly thirty thousand men there, and more add to them every day."

"They're digging in and getting ready," Kyven said, studying the map. "But why east?"

"They see it as the fastest route to Avannar," Longwell surmised. "At least that's what I think. Moving an army through enemy territory isn't easy, you have to take the shortest path." He trailed his finger to the west of Rallan. "They have scouts out along the road to the mountains just in case you surprise them."

Kyven studied the map. Their army was no match for *this*. He hated to say it, but this was a job for DeVaur and the combined army coming up behind them. They'd help, of course, but they couldn't attack an army that

big and hope to break their lines, not when they'd have to assault a fortified position with about two thousand men and six thousand Arcans against what Longwell said was nearly thirty thousand men. And he didn't entirely trust Longwell. He'd take the information on its face, but he'd scout the army himself to verify the monarch's claims. "I think we made them angry," Kyven mused.

"Slightly," Longwell snorted.

"If they're drawing men from the Free Territories, then that means that they intend to stop the southern armies here," Kyven noted soberly, scratching his jaw. "If the southern army breaks the line, they'll have a more or less free shot at Riyan."

"That's what my men report. They don't have any other major forces between here and Riyan, they've pulled them all to fort up here. It's not a bad strategy, if you ask me. It slows down the enemy and gives Riyan and Avannar more time to prepare. The river at Riyan will be a decent enough barrier as long as they fortify the area there at the city where it can be forded, use that as their anchor. It forces your army to attack one point."

"If they want to think that way," Kyven mused lightly. There was more than one way across the river when there were six Shaman with the army. He took another drink of his wine, then set the glass on the table. "Don't worry, Alak, we'll try to move back through Carin with a minimum of problems for you. And we'll see what we can do to drag those Loreguard back to the north after we break them. See what you can do to get your army positioned to split off from them."

"You're going to help?"

"For the moment," he replied honestly. "The last thing the southern armies need is Carin against them, given we're about to march through your country." Kyven studied the map, the first inklings of an idea filtering into his mind. It would be fairly dangerous, but the benefits outweighed the risks. "Hmm. Actually, I think I might be able to do something about your little problem."

“And what can a single man do, *mon andi*?”

“Oh, I have a few tricks, my lovely lady,” he said easily, giving her a playful wink.

“Don’t underestimate this man, my love. He’s probably the most dangerous man in Noraam,” Longwell chuckled.

“You don’t look all that dangerous, *mon andi*,” she smiled.

“Looks can be deceiving, my lady,” he said, reaching over and pulling the fan out of her sleeve, then snapping it open to reveal metal panels ending in gently curved, sharp edges. A flick of the wrist could cause that fan to bite to the bone. “As I’m sure you know.”

“You have quick hands,” she noted lightly, giving him a quirky smile.

“I have many talents, dear lady,” he said grandly. “I’d challenge you to a game of posts, if only I had the time.” He put his finger on the map, about where Longwell said his army was located. “Your men are about here?”

“More or less, unless they’ve been redeployed since the last report got here. My officers have to get them to to me under the table.”

“Alright. You just let me handle it. I’ll do what I can to spare your men from getting in the middle of the battle. In return, I’d kindly ask that you don’t shoot at us as we pass by,” he smiled.

Longwell chuckled. “I’ll do what I can.”

“Just tell your officers that no matter what happens, just go with it. They can’t be faulted for following orders.”

“Cryptic.”

“Come now, Alak. I like you, but I don’t entirely *trust* you.”

“He is a smart one,” Sheldra smiled.

“You pull my ass out of this bear trap, Shaman, and I guarantee you that you won’t have the Carin Army shooting at you.”

“At least for now,” Kyven noted.

“At least for now. Maybe later on, but not now,” Longwell grinned mischievously.

“Well said,” Kyven nodded as he stood up. “Now, excuse my rudeness, but I must be on my way. Ah, I assume your men outside can keep their mouths shut?”

“If the Loremasters got word that I’d had a conference with the human Shaman, they’d hang me,” he said bluntly. “So yes, they’ll keep their mouths shut.”

“I worked too hard to get my claws into a king,” Sheldra said simply. “My silence, it is guaranteed. If they hang Alak, I won’t be a queen.”

“Nothing better than simple powergrabbing,” Kyven chuckled, looking to Longwell. “Until next time, Alak. Keep a bottle of wine handy. When this is over, we’ll sit down and get drunk together and tell stories.”

“I think I’d like that, Kyven Steelhammer,” he said with an honest smile. “Maybe you could take me to see this mythical Haven place.”

“Oh, I could take you now, but you wouldn’t like what you see, King Alak Longwell,” he said with a mysterious smile. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too,” he said.

“Keep him close, Sheldra, he’s a keeper,” Kyven said as he rather ostentatiously created a swirling cloud of shadow, backing into it as he opened his eyes to the spirits, just giving them a little performance, a little flair. Sheldra gasped again when his body seemed to melt into the shadows, only his glowing eyes visible, then those too vanished as he backed into the gateway he’d converged into the shadow world.

Well, Alak hadn’t been lying.

Kyven scouted the rest of the night, and it was almost exactly as Longwell had described. The Loreguard had spread out along the West Road running from Rallan to Hattar, and they were digging trenchworks and fortifications all along it. Unsure of where the attack would take place, they were preparing to defend the entire length of the road, and would move their troops to engage the invading army when it was close enough for them to scout out. That way, no matter where they had to go, they'd have defensive positions to protect them from the attacking army. It wasn't really a bad idea, outside of one little thing.

All their defenses were pointing *south*. They weren't preparing at all for an attack from the *north*.

The army was almost exactly as Alak had described as well. There were far more Loreguard soldiers now, but there were also blue-coated Carin army regulars in the main camp in the center of their expanding defenses, as well as quite a few men in civilian clothes sleeping out in the open. They'd also taken every Arcan they could find to do the actual labor, keeping them in a series of pens along the line. That meant that as his army moved north, they'd find almost no Arcans on the plantations to take. The Loreguard had them all.

Kyven had to grit his teeth at that. There was nothing he could really do for them, since the Loreguard officers were getting smarter. They weren't keeping all the Arcans together, where Kyven could invade and free them in one fell swoop. If he freed one camp, they'd slaughter the others. To protect them, they had to be left alone...for now.

Daring another shadow walk at dawn, Kyven found out that Alak was also right about the west. They didn't expect the army to move west of Rallan, since it was so far out of that straight line from Cheston to Avannar. Alak was right that the southern armies wouldn't want to dally, both because they were moving through potentially hostile territory and if they went too far out of their way, they'd give the Loremasters too much time to potentially draw the northern kingdoms into the war on the Loremasters' side as well as fortify Riyan and Avannar and make them almost impossible

to capture. They only had scouts stationed at intervals along the western length of the road leading to the mining villages in the Smoke Mountains, squads of four mounted Loreguard who were keeping watch over the roads. Again, they were learning.

The west was the key. Kyven squatted down and watched a patrol pass, considering things. The Arcans would attack the west, take the path of least resistance, then circle around behind the fortified east, drawing as many attackers to the west as they could...and if Kyven had his way, the entire Carin Army would be among them. That would put them out of position and let DeVaur hit them like a wrecking ball at a point of his choosing...and if they did it right, the Arcans could attack them from behind, letting their allies of convenience breach the defenses while having the enemy caught in a crossfire.

And since they'd be going west, they could also do what they were going to do, split the army and send them into the mountains to clear the mountain villages and occupy the passes as well as sending the Arcans who didn't want to fight into the frontier, to start the journey to Haven.

But, that would be Danvers' call. He was the one that made the plans, but Kyven could suggest.

Shadow walking back to the camp was a bit dangerous, since the *things* had a good idea of where he was. He just barely beat them back, stepping out of the shadows near Danvers' tent just after dawn, yawning and stretching and accepting Sirra's attention when she padded over to him, bumping his shoulder with her head. "Shaman," one of Danvers' personal guard called. "The general wanted to see you as soon as you returned."

"Good, because I have a lot to tell him," he replied. "Clover! Get up!" he shouted.

It wasn't just Clover that attended the meeting, it was all the Shaman and most of Danvers' command staff, his high-ranking officers. Kyven went over everything he'd learned, pointing it out on an illusory map he created, complete with red lights and blocks denoting Loreguard positions.

“King Longwell is actually pretty well informed, and my scouting confirmed everything he told me.”

Danvers studied the illusion, hanging in midair over the folding table around which they sat or stood, stroking his chin with a finger. “We don’t have the manpower to break that defensive line,” he grunted. “Not without losing far too many troops that I’d care to lose.”

“I know, but I had something of an idea,” Kyven said, pointing to the west of Rallan. “They don’t have anything but scouts out here, making sure we don’t try to sneak around them. This is where we go. We swing out to the foothills and then split the army, letting those who are going to attack the mining villages get going as well as giving us the chance to send the Arcans that aren’t fighting into the frontier, to start for Haven. We make a little noise and attract the Loreguard, and I make sure that they send the Carin army west to engage us. We’ll outmaneuver them, get behind them, then—“ he smacked his hand against his fist. “DeVaur hits them and we hit *them* from behind. We should be able to help him break the lines and get through.”

“That has some possibilities,” Danvers said, studying the map. “But it wouldn’t work. It’s too far to go. But we can expand on that idea by doing what they don’t expect us to do.”

“Which is?” Patience asked.

“Rallan.”

Kyven spluttered. “That’s not exactly keeping Alak on our side there, Wilson.”

“Just listen, my friend,” he said, pointing at the map. “We won’t *take* Rallan. We’ll do as you suggested, attack the west road in the foothills, and we let the scouts see an army of about five thousand, too large to take on with anything less than half their full force, given that our army will dig in, look to fortify for the attack, making it look like DeVaur is going to follow behind us using the mountains to protect his west flank. That will force the

Loreguard to redeploy about half their army to come after us and move the rest closer to Rallan in case they have to make a forced march west but still have the ability to respond to the eastern defenses in case it's a trick. They can't let DeVaur slip around behind them, and it'll look like that's exactly what he's trying to do. As long as we can clear out their scouts and disable the village talkers so they don't know where DeVaur's army really is, it will let him hit the Loreguard right as they reach Rallan. Rallan will close their gates in the face of such a huge army, which basically pins the Loreguard inside the walls. Given the overwhelming numbers that DeVaur has, Rallan will surrender, and that will also mean that all those Loreguard soldiers surrender with them. If they don't surrender, DeVaur can basically trap the Loreguard in the city with a siege without devoting many of his men to it, leaving a siege force behind to hold them there while the bulk of his army goes east to engage the remaining enemy. Either way, it takes half that army off the field, leaving only the pickets left behind along their defensive line that we can clean up at our leisure. They'll probably either flee to the north or surrender given they'll be outnumbered ten to one."

"Very clever," Patience noted. "You're using the city like a giant mouse trap."

"This will take some coordination," Danvers grunted. "We have to let them *reach* Rallan, but not get *past* it. So we might have to make noise like we're going to attack the city, force them to stop there and give DeVaur time to pin them inside."

"Why don't we let them come out and take out a piece of their army, then force the remnants back into Rallan?" Colonel Bemry offered. "That way we give them a bloody nose to think about."

"We might have to if DeVaur's not in position," he said soberly, studying the illusion. "Provided he even goes for this. We stung his pride, he may decide to attack his own way...and I have to admit, he has the men to do it. But our way, he won't lose many men, where if he attacks the Loreguard lines on his own, he'll take substantial casualties. Even when

you outnumber an enemy three to one, when you attack fortified positions, you take casualties.”

“Even if he doesn’t go for it, our idea helps him, if only because we split their forces,” Quick surmised.

Danvers nodded. “And it lets us do what we have planned without DeVaur seeing us do it,” he finished. “We’ll have the mountain villages cleared of Loreguard before the Haven army takes the mountains. I’ll have my men attack and take out the Loreguard, then move on without occupying the villages. We’ll leave that to Danna’s forces, we’ll just set up the villages for it. They can go straight north through the mountains, village by village.”

“You may need a Shaman for that, General, to deal with alchemical defenses and heal the wounded. I’d be honored to help them,” Redclaw offered.

“We’ll take it,” he affirmed.

“I’m going to put a hand in, General, in a couple of places,” Kyven said. “I promised Longwell I’d try to separate his army from the Loreguard, and I’m going to do just that. I’m also going to sow a little confusion in the enemy ranks.”

“How?”

“I’m going back to Avannar and pay them a little visit,” he smiled. “I’ll make sure that the Loreguard send down orders to have the Carin Army reinforce Rallan once they see our army, getting them out of harm’s way. They’ll believe them if they come through the Loreguards’ own command network.”

“That’s going to be dangerous,” Clover warned him. “They’re waiting for you to return to Avannar, brother. They’ll be ready for you.”

“They won’t be ready for what I have in mind,” he replied. “Besides, I don’t want them to think I’ve forgotten about them,” he said with a

malicious smile. "I have to go kick the anthill a few times, give them something to do."

"Don't get too exotic, Kyven, I'm going to need you to help blind the Loreguard to DeVaur's approach," Danvers warned. "You're the only one I have that can move through the villages undetected and sabotage Loreguard talkers. We can take out their scouts, but we also have to prevent the villagers and Loreguard or Loremasters stationed in them from giving away DeVaur. An army as big as his can't really hide."

"I can do that, General," he assured him. "I can free any straggler Arcans I find at the same time."

"Alright then, I'll relay this to DeVaur and see what he says about it. Everyone, go get some breakfast."

Kyven went with the other Shaman and ate breakfast as his nannies hovered nearby, then he went to the corral to deal with the other adventure of the day. He approached his Equar as she and Strider continued to frisk about, acting like playful colts. They both settled down as he approached, Strider butting his snout against his chest and nearly knocking him down, which made him chuckle and stroke his nose. "Behave, you silly thing," he chided lightly, then he reached a hand out for the mare. She pushed against him instead, almost pushing him into Strider, which made him laugh. "I'm surrounded by evil Equars," he teased. "Now, I think you deserve a name, girl. How does Vasha sound? It's Flauren for charcoal, in honor of your dark gray coat? It does look like a charcoal color, and I think that's a pretty word."

She tossed her head noncommittally.

"Alright then, since you don't seem to object, you're Vasha from now on," he told her, patting her nose. "Now, you ready to try out the saddle and bridle? Lucky told me the other Shaman made them for us."

She snorted.

“I know, I don’t like the idea of making you uncomfortable either, but Patience was right. I can’t ride you bareback, you’re just too big. So, I need the saddle,” he chuckled. “Come on, let’s try them out.”

She didn’t complain *too* much when he got the saddle and bridle on her, since Equar saddles didn’t just cinch around the belly, they had straps that went over the chest as well. He put on her bridle, then he had to jump a little bit to get his foot in the stirrup. He pulled himself up and onto her back, and immediately felt more proper. After riding Strider, being so close to the ground on a regular horse was just *wrong*. She pranced a bit, getting used to his weight, but she didn’t buck him off. “Alright girl, let’s go find Patience so she can explain how this works, then we’ll get used to each other,” he told her.

The early morning was spent in practice, as Vasha learned how to be guided by his gentle pulls on her reins and his feet with Patience behind him in the saddle to explain things, and he got used to her quirks. She wasn’t as playful as Strider, but she did have a rather cunning and sneaky disposition...which just made her perfect for him. She twice tried to throw him when he wasn’t really expecting it, just playing with him, but she did enjoy it when they went for a run along the southern edge of the camp as it packed up, preparing to move out with a change of direction. Once the army was on the move, they got used to riding along with the other horses, as Arcans loped along on all fours to each side of them, carrying their muskets or rifles and their packs lashed to their backs. He pulled Lucky up onto the back of his saddle when he rejoined Danvers and the others, and Danvers didn’t look that happy. “Uh oh,” Kyven grunted.

“Yeah, uh oh,” Danvers growled. “DeVaur won’t have anything to do with any plan I make, much as I feared. He told us *he’ll* tell *us* what to do when the time comes, so I told him to go shit in his saddle and that we’d be drawing the Loreguard west, so he could do whatever he wanted with the information I passed along.”

“Arrogant ass,” Kyven growled. “We’re all but gift-wrapping a free pass to Riyan for him, but he’s too pissy to take it. He’d rather get men

killed doing it his way than admit that since we're up here and we can see everything, we might have a good plan."

"Exactly," he sighed. "We'll still do what we can to pull them west, so hopefully he has the sense to take advantage of it."

"How is it looking for us?"

"Pretty smooth," he replied. "Our advance units aren't finding many Arcans, though. They're reporting that the Loreguard took them."

"That's what it looked like when I looked at their main encampment," Kyven grunted. "But they didn't have them all in one pen, they had them in a series of pens spread along their line. They don't want another Riyan. They're getting smarter."

"They have some pretty intelligent and well trained officers leading the Loreguard," Danvers sighed. "I just wish they'd see they were fighting on the wrong side."

"Believe me, this is the last thing we wanted," Clover told him from beside Strider. "But it is as it is, and now we must make the best of it."

"Well, if you guys don't mind, I'll leave you that. I want to see what this girl's got," he said expectantly, patting Vasha's neck.

"Sure, go have fun, leave us to ponder the problems," Danvers teased.

"That's why I don't have officer's epaulets," he said lightly, helping Lucky down, then he trotted Vasha out of the column, then got her up to a dead run. And it was *amazing*. She could run faster than a horse, and she had that powerful Equar endurance, letting her run and run and run and run, what seemed like all day, before she started getting tired. They slowed to a stop at a little stream in a small clearing, and he slid off the saddle and let her drink as he sat on a rock and pondered his own problem, something that had wracked his brain for days.

How does one outfox a fox?

Still, after all this time, no real ideas. Everything he thought of was just too transparent, and he knew it. She knew his mind, she knew how he thought, so he was fairly sure that everything he'd thought of to try to wrest Danna away from her she already knew, and would be ready for it. But he couldn't give up. If he ever wanted to be with Danna and not have her between them, he had to beat her at this game, he had to trick or deceive or just outright force her into surrendering her hold on his intended...which was far easier said than done. She was older than him, wiser than him, smarter than him, and more ruthless than him. She'd been playing these kinds of games since before he was born, and she wasn't used to losing. That, and she always seemed to know what he was thinking. It was hard to out-think someone that can read one's mind.

The only thing he had so far was the idea of a forced path. If he didn't *have* to play her game, then he had a chance, and that was to think up a way to force her to give up Danna in a way that she couldn't prevent it, where he didn't have to trick or deceive her, he just had to follow a path that would lead him to Danna's freedom and give his spirit no way to stop it. That was the idea...but how could he go about it?

It was a complicated problem. He couldn't go so rogue that he ended up getting people killed, but he had to do something fairly drastic to force his spirit to comply. He also couldn't anger her so much she killed him, since she *could*, and do it easily. She'd proved that point several times in the past. He had to be sneaky in setting it up, so that when she did finally realize what was going on, it was too late for her to stop it.

It came down to knowing what she wanted. Well, that was fairly obvious, she wanted war. Not because she wanted to see the killing and the destruction, it was because the *only* way the Arcans were ever going to truly win their freedom would be for them to take it for themselves. On that, Kyven agreed. If the humans freed the Arcans, the humans would always believe they were better because they were the ones who were in control, and that would eventually lead to the Loremasters or some other organization trying to invade Arcan territory, taking what they saw as rightfully theirs from the pitiful slaves they had freed out of the goodness of

their hearts. No, the Arcans had to fight the humans and beat them, *prove* they were intelligent and strong, prove they deserved their freedom. A beaten humanity would accept Haven and would probably respect the borders, at least until the memory of the defeat faded or Noraam got so crowded that the only place the humans had to go was west. So, the war had to go on, and Kyven had to do everything he could to help the Arcans win the war.

So, if he couldn't take the war away from her...then what?

Kyven's eyes narrowed. Her *other* plans. He had blocked her from getting what she bargained out of Danna, through no fault on Danna's part. Perhaps he could put a hand in between Toby and Nightfall and deny her the second litter, leaving her only Umbra's three kits. And three kits couldn't sustain the species. There was nothing she could do to stop it if he got there first, and she couldn't force him to give it up, not without killing him...and if she did that, if he died while holding both Danna and Nightfall's Seals, then they would *never* have children. That was why she hadn't threatened him over Danna's Seal, because they both knew that killing him would just deny her what she wanted...and his continued survival was very much in her best interest over and above all the effort she put into getting him where he was.

No, she'd be expecting that. He had no doubt she'd already taken some preventative measures, and besides, he wasn't sure Nightfall would cooperate, since she was loyal to what she called *the mother*. Seals couldn't be placed on the unwilling.

So, he couldn't trick her, he couldn't stop her...so what was left outside of the "one path" idea that he couldn't for the life of himself think up?

He flopped on his back and sighed, looking up through the trees of the tiny clearing and into the sky. It was blue and pleasant, a single little fluffy cloud drifting by lazily. It was hard to believe there was a war going on, looking up at that beautiful sky, in this quiet, pleasant meadow.

Patience. He just had to be patient. He'd think of something eventually, so he just had to keep going, do his job, and keep looking. Eventually, an opportunity would present itself to him, he just had to have the wisdom to see it. But, there were a few other things he had to do, outside of where Clover and the others could see it. They wouldn't like what he had in mind, but it was in his spirit's design. These things had to be done, despite the fact that it might get Arcans killed. Things their adversaries had to know, so they could fully comprehend just what kind of mess they'd gotten themselves into, and also make it more certain that the Arcans were going to win. It was time to play a dangerous game that might make Clover and the other Shaman furious with him if they found out what he was doing. There were things more important than his status among the Shaman, or even Clover's friendship..

Sometimes, there could be no happy ending. Not even for himself.

Vasha drifted into his field of view, looking down at him with a mixture of curiosity and mild irritation. "I know you want to run some more," he chuckled, pointing at her. "But I'm busy. Can't you see that?" She dipped out of his view, then he gave a grunt of surprise when she clamped her teeth on his foot and pulled. "Alright, alright!" he laughed. She pranced a bit when he got up and climbed back into the saddle, then he snapped the reins. "Let's see if you're strong enough to be a Shaman's mount, Vasha!" he declared, and she charged back down the path they'd followed to reach the glen.

For a few moments, at least, he was happy, and had not a care in the world.

Kyven was almost smugly self-congratulatory, because he was *right*.

The defenses in the Loremasters' headquarters couldn't stop him...up to a point. They didn't extend into the shadow world, allowing him to look into even the area which was totally interdicted by that device, where the Circle had all their important meetings, but they did stop him from

converging a gateway back into the normal world. His powers were based on shadow, but they were rooted in spirit magic, a gift from his totem spirit, so alchemical devices that totally nullified all magic and alchemy were effective against it. But, it was a simple matter to skirt the edges of that protection and find a different way in...and besides, he was rather intent on visiting an old friend.

Greggson never saw him come in. The rather handsome man was bent over his desk, writing on a piece of parchment with crisp, bold strokes that displayed excellent penmanship, the desk illuminated by an alchemical light. Kyven soundlessly stepped out of the shadow Councillar Greggson himself cast on the wall behind him, then leaned against the wall not two rods away from him and just waited for him to sense he wasn't alone.

Disappointingly, it took Greggson nearly two minutes to finally realize he wasn't alone in the room. He raised his head, turned it towards Kyven, then gasped so loudly it sounded like he inhaled his own tongue and pushed violently back in his chair, nearly falling over. He jumped out of his chair and snatched a pistol from the desk, then pointed it at Kyven threateningly. "Who are you, and how did you get in here?" he demanded, getting control of himself as the pistol in his hand gave him a sense of control.

"Don't you read your own reports, Councillar?" Kyven asked lightly, admiring his fingernails. "I'm the black fox Shaman, the human Shaman, whatever you all call me now. Kyven Steelhammer, at your service. I'm rather disappointed in you, you know. I had over two minutes to kill you before you noticed me. Really, old boy, you need to be a little more observant." Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits for the man's benefit, causing him to blanch.

Greggson raised the pistol and pointed it at Kyven's face. "Then I can do humanity a favor here and now," he said darkly. He tried to pull the trigger, but found it stuck fast. Kyven made a yanking motion with his hand, and a thin stream of shadow dragged the pistol out of his hand like a rope. He deftly caught the pistol before it hit the ground, then twirled it around his finger ostentatiously.

“Really, Greggson, I come all this way, have ample time to kill you, reveal myself peaceably, and you try to kill me without even trying to figure out why I’m here? That’s not very smart,” he chided, palming the pistol, then throwing it back to Greggson. The man fumbled a bit, but managed to catch it before it hit him in the chest.

“And what would be worth it?” he sneered, raising the pistol again.

“The southern armies just left Georvan and are moving up through Carin,” he replied, stepping around the desk and sitting in the visitor’s chair, even putting his feet on Greggson’s desk. “The Alamari army just marched past Lanna and are force marching up to join the Flaurens and Georvans, and will probably catch up to them somewhere in northern Carin or the southern Free Territories. Field Marshall DeVaur plans to attack the Loreguard defenses east of Rallan, probably around Durm. I’m not entirely sure where yet, but as soon as I figure it out, I’ll let you know. There’s also a rift in the army between DeVaur and Danvers. He’s ignoring Danvers’ intelligence and advice because I humiliated him in Cheston, and he blames Danvers for it. He intends to just plow through your forces like an angry bull, and damn the intelligence.”

Greggson gave him a dark look, but one that was strangely curious, and his pistol lowered a few fingers. “And why would you tell me this?”

“Because you need to know the truth. You need to hear it from me first, so you know that I know what I’m talking about. When you have your spies verify what I just told you, you’ll find it completely accurate, even down to the pissing contest between DeVaur and Danvers.”

“And what’s in it for you?”

“Oh, it’s fairly obvious what’s in it for me,” he smiled, putting his hands behind his head. “I want you to read all the reports and missives and find out that everything I told you is exactly right. I want you to understand that I know *everything*, far beyond even your own intelligence sources. I can see the big picture, the design within the strings, mainly because I’m the one pulling many of them. The Flaurens are out for blood, and they

won't listen to *anything* you have to say. They wouldn't even believe you if you had an alchemical recording of this conversation, they're that furious. The Georvans see this as the chance to break the alliance and spread their borders like they did with South Carin, conquer new territory. There's already a decree to annex Cheston being prepared in Lanna. And the Alamari are just pissed off because they have no jobs and want to punish someone for it. They're fighting mad and they'll take that fight to the Loreguard because they're there. The Loreguard is about to go up against a force that will not offer any quarter. They're coming for the Loremasters, Greggson, and nothing can stop them."

"That's brave talk, abomination," he spat, "once the northern kingdoms come to our aid."

"Oh, I doubt they're going to do that," Kyven said lightly. "See, before I came here, I visited all the northern kings and explained everything to them, the real reasons why this war got started, including showing them some very real evidence. The King of Phion was a bit hesitant to believe me until I took him out and *showed* him what you were up to. He believes me now," he said with a slight smile.

Greggson gave him a strange look.

"I'm a Shaman, Councillar, and your own reports tell you that my particular area of expertise is espionage," he smiled lightly. "You think I didn't know? I know *everything*, from your intention to settle the frontier to your plan to use the crystal shortage to take over Noraam. I even know about the machine your men were supposed to find that you were hoping would control or kill the Arcans. It's what I do, and pardon my saying it, but I'm very good at it." He put his hands on his stomach sedately. "The reports you get from your Loremasters in those courts will be quite desperate and confused, since they've been kicked out of the courts and aren't quite sure why. And now the kings are preparing to come down here and punish you for breaking the alliance. You should be getting your first declaration of war within a few hours."

“Bullshit!”

“I’ll let your own reports prove it for me,” he smiled ominously. “So, Greggson, I’ve isolated the Loremasters from the rest of Noraam. You’ll have furious southerners on one side and vengeful northerners on the other. They will grind you up between them like dogmeat.”

Greggson gave him a long, hard look, but a look tinged with fear. “And why tell me this?”

“Because I can save you from all of it, and make you very rich besides,” he said easily. “First, they’ll destroy Avannar. Then they’ll turn realize that the only mines left producing crystals are right here in the Free Territories, within a short march from the ruins of Avannar, temptingly close at hand. Everyone knows that now, Greggson,” he crooned. “When they destroy Avannar, every king will order his army to immediately turn to take over the mining villages, the last areas still producing crystals in any quantity, to secure those crystals for their own kingdom over the others. I know for a fact that DeVaur already has those orders. As soon as they destroy Avannar, Flaur will invade the western territories to take over the mines. I have it in writing,” he said, taking a piece of paper out of his doublet and flipping it adeptly onto the desk, where it drifted down to a rest. “They can’t let anyone but their own nation control those mines. The alliances will break down, and there’ll be open warfare of the most ghastly and bloody sort going on around the smoking ruins of Avannar.”

“And all of Noraam goes to war while you stand on the sidelines, cheering them on,” he realized darkly.

“With pom-poms,” he agreed with a light smile. “This is really all your fault, Greggson. Well, not yours personally, but the Loremasters. When you decided to invade sovereign Arcan territory, you forced our hand. Now you’ve brought us out into the open, and as you may have noticed, the Arcans have learned well from the humans about how to be cunning and deceptive. You pissed off the Shaman, and the Shaman sent me. I think

you're starting to realize just what kind of chaos I can cause, Gregg, and I'm just *one* Shaman."

"Sovereign Arcan territory?" Greggson spat. "What bullshit is that?"

"Don't you have Taggan Wild's report by now?" he asked. When he saw Greggson's blank look, Kyven chuckled. "I guess I got here a little too early. Well, I happen to have a copy of it right here," he said, pulling a second piece of parchment from his doublet. "Feel free to have it verified. You'll find it's a perfect copy of his report. While you look it over," he said, throwing it onto the desk, "let me summarize its contents. Wild was ambushed at the frontier settlement of Deep River by an army of well over two hundred thousand Arcans, who were well armed and highly disciplined, being led by a former Loreguard investigations officer named Danna Pannen. That's why you've had no contact with Wild since just before they reached Deep River, the Shaman within the Arcan army blocked his talkers and killed every messenger he tried to dispatch. They even killed the messenger pigeons," he stated bluntly, which made Greggson blanch a little. "Wild was forced to surrender his army after a four day siege, when he realized that there was no help coming and General Pannen had him dead to rights. The Arcans didn't slaughter your men, Greggson, they disarmed them and told them to leave Arcan territory. The first elements of that army should come out of the Cuman Pass in just a couple of days, a little hungry and very tired, but alive and well. General Wild rode ahead of his army to Two Rivers to get word to you as fast as he could, and that report should be landing on your desk first thing in the morning, if they don't wake you up early to attend council so you can hear it from your own intelligence chief. The Arcan army is now moving east, and they intend to take the mountain passes and invade the mining villages and kick every human out of the Smoke Mountains they can find. Then, after they consolidate their hold on the mountains, they'll march on Avannar. You won't be able to stop them, you don't have any forces in place to deal with it with DeVaur coming north with murder in his eyes and the closest northern army, Mallan's, staging just out of musket range for an attack on the city and with even more armies marching south to get a piece of that action. So, Gregg, you can watch

Avannar get crushed between three armies, or you can listen to me and maybe save your own ass.”

“The human armies would attack the Arcan army.”

“Well, if Flaur didn’t have a treaty with Haven, that might happen,” he agreed with a nod. “But it’s not going to. The southern armies are allied to the Arcans in a common interest, and that’s getting rid of the Loremasters. Why do you think I’ve been *helping* them, Greggson? I know you know I’ve been working in the south. I do have something of a reputation,” he said lightly. “Well, it was to prepare for DeVaur’s arrival, and now I’m helping them as they march north, making sure they get to Avannar in one piece so they can burn this place to the ground. In return for the aid of the Arcans and a supply of crystals from Haven’s own stockpiles to help Flaur stave off the coming shortage, the Flaurens have agreed to free all Arcans they find during their march north and allow them to go to Haven. When the Arcans come in from the west and the southerners come in from the south, they’ll join together, and that’s a force even the northern armies won’t challenge, at least at first, and that delay is all they’ll need to burn Avannar to the ground.” He pulled another piece of paper from his doublet. “Here it is. I’m sure if you take this down to your intelligence division, they’ll find an exact copy of this buried in some Flauren bureaucrat’s office in Tallasar. Or they can just ask around their parliament, it’s fairly common knowledge in the upper echelons of Flauren government that they’ve allied themselves to Haven. Many of them were there when the Haven emissary and their king signed the treaty. The Flaurens intend to break that treaty at their earliest opportunity, wanting nothing more than the help they need to get to Avannar in one piece and put their armies a stone’s throw from the mining villages, but the treaty itself is right here for you.”

Greggson looked at the parchment with something approaching horror, then snatched it up and read it quickly.

“You’ve managed to piss off about half of Noraam, Gregg,” Kyven noted easily. “And I’ve stirred up the other half against you. You’re one of the men in power and control here. You’re a Councillar. When DeVaur gets

here, I'm sure he already has your execution warrant on his person, just waiting for the chance to use it. There's only one way out for you now, and that's to work for me. I'll see to it that you live. Hell, I'll even make sure you're fairly wealthy and very comfortable. I'll set you up in a nice house somewhere warm where you can while away your days throwing parties and screwing willing beauties attracted to your money more than anything else. If you don't, well, I guess you can decide between being hanged, shot in the street like a dog, drawn and quartered, or burned at the stake. I'd go with hanging, myself. Just a short drop and—" he clapped his hands, making Greggson flinch—"it's over."

Greggson gave him a hard look, quiet for a long, long moment. "And what would you have me do?"

"A few strategic orders placed here and there, a little artful deception, a few enlightening conversations from time to time, and in return, I'll see to it you get out of this alive. I'll make sure of it personally. And as I'm sure you've figured out by now, I can go pretty much well anywhere I want and nobody can stop me. I'll save you, smuggle you out of Avannar, then you can retire to someplace warm with plenty of money. Maybe you could raise sugarcane or something. It's better than an unmarked grave." He took his feet off Greggson's desk. "But, I won't ask for a decision right now. Research everything I told you, find out for yourself that I'm exactly right, that everything I've told you is the absolute truth. *Then*, once you know that everything I told you is right and you can admit that Avannar is doomed, you can give me your answer. I'll save your life, Tomlin Greggson, and you'll come out of it a rich man for your trouble."

"And lose my honor."

"Come now, Greggson, you of all people know that the Loremasters are built on a lie," he said. "They lie to the peoples of Noraam concerning the Arcans and the Shaman. You *know* the Arcans aren't just dumb animals, I know you do. I've heard you *say it* with my own ears. And all the Loremasters know the truth about the Shaman and the spirits we serve. That's why they've spent centuries villifying us to the people, because it

violates one of the fundamental means of control the Loremasters use to keep their power in Noraam. They've deceived the peoples and the kings of Noraam for centuries. I honestly believe that if the Loreguard generals knew what was *really* going on in this building, you'd see more than half of them resign. What the Loremasters are doing is totally against the very oath the Loreguard take when they enlist for service, and you know it. You've administered that oath personally, Tomlin Greggson, you stood up there and intentionally lied to those men, and you knew it when you did it. You're not losing any honor betraying an organization built on deceit. You'll actually be regaining your honor by finally standing up for the truth. Or at least a certain truth," he said with a quirky smile. "The truth is a fluid thing, Gregg, often dependent on a person's point of view. The reality is that truth is nothing but a person's own perception of things, and it can change as easily as the ripples flow across the pond after you've thrown the stone." He stood up. "What you need to ask yourself is just what truth you want to follow, Greggson. The truth built on pain and agony, or the truth built on self preservation." He took a single step back. "I'll wander back this way in a few days, after you've had time to verify everything I've told you. Think about it. Think about what's coming. And when you can admit to yourself with all honesty that I'm right and that Avannar is doomed, we can talk about how you can save yourself from a noose, or a burning stake. And if you refuse, well, I promise to leave you be. After all, what DeVaur will do to you when he gets his hands on you will be far worse than what I would do," he said with a chilling smile, as wisps of shadow started to rise up from the floor. "Think it over, Tomlin Greggson, so when you have your answer for me, it's an answer you believe as the truth." The shadows twined and braided up his body, covering him, until only his glowing eyes were visible. Then those too vanished within the shadow, which evaporated like morning fog and left nothing behind in its wake.

Kyven almost paid for that little bit of performance with his life.

Greggson would never know, of course, but after all the shadow walking he'd done running around northern Noraam, the *things* were all but

waiting for him the instant he set foot in their domain. He almost got killed converging a gate and literally diving through it, a gate that dropped him at the doorstep of the whorehouse on Sun Street, one of Shario's many holdings. He got up off the porch and dusted himself off, then he knocked on the door just like he was any other customer, who'd just happened to fall down coming up the steps. The door opened to a very large, rather ugly man, Gruff the bouncer, who gave him an incredulous look; Kyven wasn't using an illusion, and the whorehouse was just two doors down from the blackened bones of Kyven's former shop. They'd seen him many times before. "What's yer pleasure, traveler?" he asked in a surprisingly smooth voice, trying to hide his surprise.

"Pookums sent me," Kyven said mildly.

The man jutted his head out the door and looked to each side, then he stepped back and let Kyven in. It was a codeword Shario had told him that would grant him safe haven in any of Shario's front businesses, because he'd need a place to hide until morning at the least. It was far too dangerous to shadow walk right now, or any time in the near future. Even though they knew it was him, they wouldn't take him as anything but a customer unless he used that code, it told them that he was in trouble and needed to be hidden immediately. He was led through a perfumed common room where several of Shario's whores lounged about, and a few of them brightened when they saw him, then pouted a bit when the bouncer led him to a side door.

"Kyven? Kyven, is that you?" one of the whores asked in surprise.

"Mellicent, nice to see you," he replied with a smile and a wave. He wasn't wearing an illusion, but here, he wouldn't need one.

"Shario is here, Kyven," the bouncer told him. "I'll take you to him."

"That sounds nice," he agreed. "How has it been here?"

"Nervous," he replied. "Shario is preparing to pull his business holdings and move south. Things are looking a bit grim for Avannar."

“You don’t know the half of it,” he murmured. “I suggest you pack quickly and catch the next boat to Flaur, Gruff. I’d be a poor friend not to warn you.”

Gruff led him to a small office on the top floor of the whorehouse, where Shario sat behind a desk, talking to a slender female cat Arcan, a black and white calico with irregular patches of black in her predominately white fur. She was almost criminally cute in a youthful way, and wore an elegant collar and a low-cut red dress commonly seen on a prostitute. Shario started when Gruff let him in through the door, then he laughed and stood up. “Kyven!” he said happily, opening his arms. “I’m quite surprised to see you, my friend! What brings you back to Avannar?”

“Oh, just hiding out after lighting a fuse, my friend,” he said, stepping inside. Gruff closed the door behind him.

“Shaman, will you bless me?” the Arcan asked hopefully, stepping up to him with a bright smile.

“Of course, my little one,” he replied with a gentle smile. He put his hand on her shoulder and recited the ritual benediction.

“Kyven, this is one of my most trusted associates. We call her Pockets.”

“And how did you earn that name, little one?” he asked her with a light smile.

“I can pick any pocket in Avannar,” she replied with a proud smile. “Master Shario taught me himself!”

“And that’s no boast, she’s the best pickpocket I have,” he agreed with a smile, sitting back down. “Why don’t you go downstairs and rest, my nimble one? Me and Kyven no doubt have some business to discuss.”

“Of course, Master Shario. Shaman, it was good to meet you,” she said, putting her hand on his arm, then scurrying past.

“She’s adorable,” Kyven noted as she closed the door.

“She’s very popular with the males, and she’s so cute that she’s very disarming to the human men she victimizes,” he said with a light smile. “Sit, sit! I will pour the wine!”

They shared a glass of wine, as was Shario’s custom, drinking most of it before they started to talk. “So, what brings you here, Kyven?”

“Oh, just stirring up the Loremasters again,” he chuckled. “I cornered one of the Councillars and offered him safety and riches to turn against his own.”

“A tall order.”

“Oh, I picked this one because it’s the *last* thing he’ll do. He’ll run straight to the Circle and tell them everything, which is exactly what I want him to do. The information he gives them just sets up the Loreguard for a beatdown. They’ll walk right into a trap, and the bad part is they know they’re going to do it, but they have no choice. It’s a no-win situation for them.”

Shario chuckled. “Always with the games with you.”

“Guile and deceit, Shario. It’s the code we both live by.”

“True, true,” he agreed. “How is my little chef?”

“Almost back to Haven by now,” he replied. “When she gets there, she’ll become a very important person, both her and Tweak. They’ll become the master crystalcutters for their own shops and take on apprentices.”

“A waste of talent for my little chef, cooking is her calling,” he sighed. “Tell me, my friend. Tell me honestly. What goes on?”

“Leave Avannar, Shario,” Kyven said bluntly and intensely. “Tomorrow. Pack everything and leave. You *do not* want to be here.”

“I was preparing to do just that.”

“Prepare faster. It’s not the Flauren army that’s going to threaten the city, it’s the Mallans.”

“The *Mallans*?” he said in surprise.

“I told King Fredden everything, I proved every word of it with undeniable evidence, and now he’s furious. He already sent a declaration of war, and it won’t take him long to muster his army. It’s only forty minars to Fredick, after all. Avannar will be under siege from the north within three days. So you have to be out of this city by tomorrow night, before they close off the city.”

Shario frowned. “I had hoped to have a little more time, but if that’s what I have, then that’s what I have. Gruff!” he shouted. The door opened immediately and the ugly man looked in. “Spread the word. Everyone must be ready to leave by noon tomorrow. Take only what is important. Warn the ships that they must be loaded and ready to cast off by sunset tomorrow.”

“I’ll take care of it, Master Shario,” he nodded, closing the door.

“I hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but your countrymen can be real jackasses, Shario,” he said, taking another sip of wine. “Field Marshall DeVaur is an unmitigated ass.”

Shario laughed. “The military officers usually are, so you get no challenge from me over that statement,” he smiled roguishly. “The rigors of military life have worn away the polish of a Flauren gentleman.”

Kyven chuckled. “Outside of that, things south are going more or less according to plan,” he related. “The southern armies will probably be knocking on the gates of Avannar in three weeks, depending on how well I set up the Loreguard to get their asses kicked at Rallan. If DeVaur does it right, he can crush the only real army between him and Avannar in one fell swoop and have a straight shot right to here. There’s a garrison in Riyan, and the Regulars, but they don’t have the numbers. They’ll flee north in the face of DeVaur’s army and help reinforce Avannar. I suspect they’ll get called in as soon as Mallan threatens from the north,” he mused. “Riyan

doesn't matter to the Loremasters as much as Avannar does. They'll sacrifice it in the long run in the face of the immediate threat, but it won't do them much good. As soon as DeVaur gets here, he'll flatten Avannar like a toy kite."

"So, things are coming to a close."

"This part is," Kyven told him, leaning back and swirling the last bit of wine in his glass. "Afterward comes the real chaos, Shario. All those armies will be at Avannar, and all their leaders *know* that the crystals are almost gone. I can almost smell a betrayal in the air. Before the dust settles over what used to be Avannar, they're going to make a run at the mines, to take control of them, and they'll fight each other every step of the way. I've already warned Timble to clear out the shop and get the hell out of there, since the Atan mines are still producing. I don't want them there when those armies reach Atan, things will get very nasty." He sighed. "I've done everything I can to keep things under control and get rid of the Loremasters, but once Avannar falls," he said, spreading his hands, sloshing his wine a little. "It's out of our hands. We can only grab on and ride the wagon to the bottom of the hill, and hope it doesn't tip over on us."

"Truly," Shario agreed, finishing off his wine. "I hate to be a rude host, my friend, but if I am to evacuate tomorrow, there are many things I must see to. Perhaps we can talk tomorrow?"

"Make it early, my friend, I have to leave at dawn," he replied. "I have a few things to do, and there's not much time."

"I will. Gruff will show you to a bedroom, my friend, and if you want company, I'm sure we can discuss it," he smiled.

"Danna would kill me," he replied. "I'll just take the sleep, my friend. We'll talk more in the morning, then I have to be on my way."

Kyven left Shario's office, privately a little sad. He hated lying to his friend, but it was necessary to cover his tracks. Shario wasn't going to go help pack, he was going to send an emergency message back to Flaur using

his alchemical machines to tell them that Avannar was about to be sieged, he was evacuating, and pass on what Kyven told him about the Councillar, most likely. Kyven was setting DeVaur up not to smash the Loreguard army, but to get his ass kicked, to have the Loreguard take a *big* bite out of his army. DeVaur just had too many men, they were too well disciplined. They had to be bloody by the time they got to Avannar, so the battle there whittled them down even more, which put them on an even keel with the Georvans and the armies marching in from the north. If the Flaurens managed to take the mining villages, even the Arcans would be hard pressed to either repel them or uproot them if they had the chance to dig in. They had to be brought down a bit, softened up, and if Kyven did everything just right, the Loreguard would cost them a *lot* of men to break their defenses. Kyven didn't want it getting back to Flaur that he'd set them up, so he planted the seed in Shario that he was setting up the *Loreguard* for the fall, not the Flaurens. And he had the perfect excuse to get away with it.

Field Marshall DeVaur.

It would be DeVaur's own fault for not listening to Danvers, in the eyes of the Flaurens. DeVaur's arrogance would cause him to take the blame for the setback, not Kyven's machinations to put an army right in his path that knew *exactly* where and when he intended to attack. After all, the Flaurens would know that DeVaur ignored Danvers' intelligence and attacked on his own, ramming his men right into the heart of the enemy rather than outflanking them using Danvers' army as a diversion, as Danvers suggested. DeVaur would take the bath for the costly victory, and Kyven's duplicity would remain undiscovered.

Greggson would pretend to go along with Kyven to pump him for information, then use that information against the army. Kyven had specifically chosen him because he was a loyal patriot to the Loremaster cause, where several of the other Councillars would have taken the offer...and one of them would be getting a visit from him soon to get the exact same offer, so Kyven had a thumb on the orders coming out of their headquarters. Greggson would be his direct line into the Loremasters to salt both truth and lies into the field, the immediate truth reinforcing the lies to

come. And his first task had been to warn the Loreguard that the western attack by Danvers' army was just a diversion, causing them to put the bulk of their army right in DeVaur's path, behind heavily fortified positions, then give DeVaur one hell of a bloody nose when he attacked them. Kyven had no doubt that Greggson was in front of the Circle at that very moment telling them everything he wanted them to know. He'd have other tasks for Greggson to carry out, and if he did them well enough...hell. Kyven might just kidnap him and honor his promise, leave him on some southern plantation with plenty of money, the reward for such excellent and faithful service to Kyven's cause. For someone like Greggson, that would be the ultimate insult. And Kyven was petty enough to do it.

Kyven would pit the armies against each other rather than allowing them to ally with each other and attack the Arcans when they finally showed themselves, then use each side to hide what he was doing by spinning a web that always led back to the center, always led to a viable explanation for why things were going wrong, or right, depending on who was getting what particular version of the information he was spreading.

Guile and deceit. And the time had come to start deceiving the very men who were depending on him for his honesty.

Such were the necessities of war.

Chapter 16

The army moved west by north for two days, and even as it moved, it swelled somewhat. The Loreguard had snapped up all the plantation workers east of them, but out to the west of Rallan there were still Arcans on the plantations to liberate, further west and down the back roads where the Loreguard hadn't gone. The army was moving in a fan formation steadily to their destination, the base of the Smoke mountains and the terminus of the West Road from Rallan, which ended at the foothill village of Foggy Peak. Kyven himself moved ahead of the formation, looking over the tiny hamlets and villages spread through the woods, sending information about them back to Danvers for him to use as he needed.

For a change, he wasn't moving alone. His three nannies were with him, as well as Lucky, who had decided that he was Kyven's groom for his Equars and was now taking care of Vasha. Sirra and Dauro were also lurking about, moving more or less parallel to them as they followed the map he was given from village to village. When he reached a village, he went in alone and had his nannies and Lucky circle it out of sight, then met up with them on the far side after his investigation was complete. The town visits were all relatively routine, since his illusions made him appear non-threatening, and he caused no trouble. He drifted in, surveyed the town's defenses, found any Loremasters that might be in residence, then he killed them, stole their talkers, and moved on. When he came across a village with a Loreguard detachment, be it a single squad who was stationed in the village for their road patrols or a patrol resting before getting back on the road, he completely avoided them and moved on. Whether there were Loreguard or not, he drained the collar of ever Arcan in the village and told them to flee south in the night before he moved on, that the Masked was to the south and would take care of them. The talkers he sent back to the army

via a courier than ran back and forth between him and the army, Lightfoot, and the Arcans he freed invariably found their way to the army.

After they camped for the night, he practiced with his shadow powers, then shadow walked out to do his business. The first night he visited Greggson again to get the man's answer, which obviously was yes, but didn't demand any information or favors from him quite yet. He was obviously lying and would be a double agent working for the Loremasters, but that was exactly what he wanted him to be. The second night he again surveyed the Loreguard's defensive lines east of Rallan, and saw that they were preparing for DeVaur's arrival. He returned and reported in to Danvers about the troop build up, which Danvers relayed to DeVaur. He then used the shadow world to hunt down Danna, not to visit her, but to see where she was, and he was honestly surprised.

She was only about thirty minars west of Atan. Her army was camped, and from the look of it, they would march into Atan by late afternoon tomorrow.

He returned to his camp to see what was, to him, the usual. Ebony was prowling around the perimeter while Striker was engaged in light conversation with Lucky. Lightfoot was with them that night, and she had Lucky sitting in front of her cross-legged while she sat on a log, her arms draped over his shoulders possessively. Though she hadn't yet caved in and slept with him yet, everyone in the whole army knew that Lucky *belonged* to Lightfoot. And Lucky was quite content with his own personal form of slavery. Fastpaw was studying a chessboard that an officer had given Kyven, as Kyven had taught him the basics of the game the night before, and he was puzzling things out. Sirra and Dauro were laying at the edge of camp, close to Vasha, who had torn down a maple sapling and was gnawing on it sedately. "Shaman," Ebony said immediately when Kyven stepped out of the shadows at the edge of the camp.

"Ebony," he nodded. "All quiet?"

She nodded, stepping in with him as he approached their small fire. “We’ll keep watch in shifts so you can sleep.”

“I’m not a baby, woman,” he told her, which made Lightfoot smile slightly. He pointed at the striped cat. “Aaat, don’t start with me, furball,” he warned, which made her bark in laughter before returning to her silence. He sat on the log beside her. “I just came back from Danvers’ main camp.” He told them about his scouting of the Loreguard army. “DeVaur looks like he’s gonna just try to march right over them. I hope he’s not that stupid.”

“He’s human,” Lightfoot shrugged.

“We’ll have no racial superiority here, little missy, since *I’m* human,” he retorted.

“Nobody thinks so,” she mused, giving him a slight smile.

“Well, the Arcans don’t,” Striker agreed. “The ones I’ve talked to think you’re an Arcan changed into a human. They’re rather surprised to find out you were really born human.”

“I’m not too worried about that,” he said. “From the looks of it, we’ll reach Foggy Peak tomorrow afternoon. Since we’re fairly close, let’s go over the plan again.” Fastpaw abandoned the chessboard and came over with Ebony, and they sat on the ground before him. “What is my name?”

“Lieutenant Patton Brice of the Loreguard,” Striker replied.

“My reason for coming to Foggy Peak?”

“You’re on a mission from Loreguard headquarters,” Ebony answered. “Investigating rumors of a large group of organized Arcans in the mountains west of the village.”

“And our job?”

“Set them up for Danvers,” Lightfoot murmured.

“Exactly. Lightfoot, Ebony, Fastpaw, your job is to survey the terrain around the village and find any features that might give the army problems

when it comes in, find good defensible positions to build fortifications, as well as make a little noise to make the villagers believe that *something* is northwest of the village, which will let Danvers march right in from the southeast. Striker and Lucky will stay with me to pretend to be my slaves, because, I'm sorry Striker, you two are the least threatening-looking."

"No offense taken, Shaman," Striker chuckled.

"You two need to keep your eyes open, study everything, and talk to the Arcans in town. Find out how many villagers there are, how many are men of fighting age, and how many weapons are in the village, both alchemical and regular. Do *not* warn the Arcans we're about to free them. We need as much information as we can get so Danvers knows what's here and he can plan for it."

"Be careful," Lightfoot warned Lucky, patting his chest with both hands.

"I will be, Lightfoot, I promise," he replied, reaching up and taking her hands.

"While you do that, I'll disable anything that might give our army problems when it comes in, any siege weaponry or large-scale alchemical weapons. I don't expect there to be any, but you never really know—" he cut off as he sensed something...well, something *strange*, like a disturbance in the night. He turned in the direction that it seemed to come from, then jumped a little when the shadows at the edge of the campsite shifted, then swirled, and then a figure literally fell out of them, flopping onto the ground just inside the light of the fire.

It was Nightfall!

"Nightfall!" he gasped, jumping up. The female shadow fox Arcan looked at him, a bit vacantly, then scrambled forward as if something were hot on her heels. She took his hand and jumped back to her feet, then literally got behind him, halfway crawling up his back.

“Are they coming?” she gasped, her body shaking. “Did they follow me?”

He laughed helplessly. “They can’t come into our world,” he told her. “You figured it out!”

“It’s my second time,” she told him. “I wanted to see where you were, so I looked for you just as you explained it. I didn’t expect them to find me so fast!”

“I walked earlier tonight, so they were probably already in the general area,” he told her. He shifted his senses into the shadows, and found she was right. They were right on top of them, in the sense of the shadow world, and any further walking would be suicide. “Well, you’re stuck here until morning, so go ahead and have a seat. Ebony, get the talker and tell Danvers to tell Toby that Nightfall’s here, so he doesn’t worry.” Ebony nodded and hurried to the packs, and Kyven led Nightfall over to the log and sat her down by Lightfoot. “Well, congratulations, you’re the first to figure it out,” he told her.

“Second, including you,” she said with a weak smile. “It was everything you warned it was. I should have listened closer.”

“You listened enough to get out when you should have,” he replied, patting her on the shoulder.

“They were *frightening*,” she shuddered. “I could sense their hunger. They wanted to eat me!”

“That’s part of why it’s dangerous,” he reminded. “In there, you’re the prey, not the predator, Nightfall. You have to move swiftly and carefully.”

“You make it look so easy,” she grunted, then chuckled ruefully. “But that doesn’t prepare one for the dizziness or the fear.”

“Now you know why she didn’t take a timid girl for her Arcan,” he told her.

She gave him a weak little smile. “Might I have something to eat?”

“Certainly,” Striker said with a smile.

The other sat around and listened as Nightfall ate some of the venison and described her two successful shadow walks. The first had been literally one step, managing to get into the shadow world, panicking a little due to the vertigo, then getting right back out. She admitted with a frizzed face that she threw up several times after getting out, then she settled down and managed to do it again, this time seeking Kyven out the way he’d explained, searching for him among the shadows. She found him, and they found her, so she converged a gateway and literally threw herself through it as they reached out for her. “I’ve never felt it’s like,” she said with a shudder. “Those things, their hunger is like an angry dog, barking into your ears, scattering your thoughts.”

“You don’t entirely get used to it, but you can learn to tolerate it,” Kyven told her. “The vertigo, well, that you just have to endure. It doesn’t get any better, but the more you’re exposed to it, the less it bothers you.”

“What’s vertigo exactly?” Fastpaw asked.

“It’s like being so dizzy you can barely stand,” Nightfall answered. “The sense of up and down changes, and since everything in there is murky and shifting, your eyes can’t fix on a point for reference. In there, you feel like you’re tumbling down a hill, rolling and rolling, but you don’t actually go anywhere because there’s really no up or down. So, you’re endlessly falling in place.”

Kyven chuckled. “Don’t worry, Nightfall, DeVaur puked all over himself when I took him in there, and Patience immediately ran off behind a bush when I brought the other Shaman to save her dignity. You’ll get used to it.”

Nightfall brushed a stray lock of black hair back over her shoulder, returning it to the thick fan of luxurious black hair that went all the way down to the base of her tail. “I hope so. I want to learn more, and if two of us can walk, well, that means there’s two of us in case we’re needed.”

“Has Toby been practicing?”

“I think he practices more to keep me from making him look bad than to explore his abilities,” Nightfall said darkly, which made Lucky laugh. “He believes that since he’ll be changed back when he’s done, there’s no real need to learn skills he won’t have. But he also can’t abide me learning a skill he hasn’t learned. He’s a very competitive man.”

“And you’ll rub it in for a few days, naturally,” Kyven smiled.

“Until he learns it himself,” she corrected shamelessly, which made Kyven chuckle.

“We’re a pretty petty bunch,” Kyven said to the smiling Lucky. “Always squabbling with one another in our subtle ways.”

“Who, Kyven?”

“The shadow foxes,” Nightfall replied with a little smile, glancing up at Kyven. “Guile and deceit, young male. It’s our mantra, even more so among ourselves than with others.”

“Naw, you’d never lie to me, Nightfall,” Lucky said with an outrageously overdone look of innocence.

“You keep believing that, Lucky,” she replied dryly, which made Kyven laugh.

After Nightfall ate, they settled down for the night. Ebony took the first watch, prowling the edges of the camp as Kyven laid down by the glowing coals from the fire, Nightfall curled up against his back. Nightfall was more spooked by the things in the shadow world than she was willing to admit, and she was seeking him out for comfort and a feeling of security, reminding him that Nightfall was actually a very young female. Young, but also very brave and very strong. She’d get over her fear and go back in the shadow world, he was certain of it. He went over what would happen tomorrow in his mind, and the work they’d have to do when the army arrived the day after. The digging in, the noisemaking to draw the

Loreguard west, it was part of their attempt to help DeVaur get through, but Kyven already knew that DeVaur was walking into a trap. He was angry with Danvers and Kyven, but he also wasn't a stupid man. He was moving north cautiously, listening to Danvers' intelligence but not entirely trusting it until his own scouts confirmed what Danvers told him. He'd see that the Loreguard was waiting for him, but by then it would be too late. He'd be too close and would have no choice but to assault the fortified Loreguard positions. How well he did that would show everyone just how good of a general he was.

He would lose men, and after losing even more in the attack on Avannar, Kyven figured the Flauren army would be more or less neutralized as a threat to Haven.

It was a low, rumbling sound he couldn't quite identify at first, then he realized it was purring. He opened his eyes to the spirits in the moonless night and looked across the camp, where Lucky and Lightfoot were. Lightfoot was laying on her back, a content little smile on her face as Lucky licked her under her chin, his hand roaming up and down her sleek body. He wanted her, but Kyven could see that he was obeying her by not going through with it. She was letting him touch her, explore her, do anything but what they both wanted to do. For that matter, she had her hands all over him as well.

Eh, it was good for them. They just had to keep Lucky alive. Lightfoot...he had no worries about her.

Kyven went to sleep, but sometime during the night, he woke up, as something tickled at his senses in a way he couldn't quite explain. He sat up and looked at Striker, who was standing at the edge of camp with his impact rod in his hand, the coyote looking calm. However, his ears were picked up, and Kyven could hear him sniffing at the wind. Sirra and Dauro as well were awake, their ears up, looking around.

Then he heard it. It was the unmistakable faint clinking of metal. Distant, barely audible, but in the forest, nothing else made that kind of

sound.

Lightfoot was up and slinking into the forest literally within three seconds of that sound tickling Kyven's ears, leaving Lucky a little confused and half-asleep, and the two Lupans also crept into the trees. Kyven got up as well, making a motion at Striker to stay at camp and protect Lucky, then he put a hand to the amulet and enacted its power to change him. He felt his body turn cold, his bones into malleable ice, as he was poured into his other form, and then he shook himself a little reflexively after it was done. Immediately, he opened his enhanced senses to the night and opened his eyes to the spirits, taking a bandanna from his gear and tying it over his eyes so the glow didn't get him shot. He couldn't smell anything, but his ears could pick out faint shaking of brush that seemed against the prevailing wind. Someone sneaking towards the camp, about four hundred rods out.

"What goes on, Kyven?" Lucky asked in a hushed whisper.

"Someone's sneaking up on the camp," he whispered back as Ebony and Fastpaw got to their feet. "Striker, stay here and defend the camp. Use my rifle. Ebony, Fastpaw, with me."

"I can help!" Lucky protested as loudly as he dared.

"Your job is to protect Vasha and our equipment," Kyven replied sharply. "There's a shockrod in my pack, Lucky, I know you know how to use it."

Lucky nodded, then hurried over to Kyven's pack as quietly as he could.

"Stay with them, Nightfall," he said as he and his two taller companions crept into the forest on all fours, Kyven's body disappearing into the shadows as soon as he left the small clearing.

They caught up with Lightfoot at a small ridge looking down into a very narrow clearing that had a small creek bisecting it, where about twenty Loreguard were on foot, all of them equipped with Briton rifles rather than muskets. They were drinking at the creek, refilling canteens, as the man in

front of the column used an alchemical point light to refer to a map. The tiny light source was almost like a beacon in the night, but to Kyven's Shaman vision, the twenty men were as plain as day.

"Shut that off, Lieutenant, or you'll ruin your night vision," the man beside the leader called in a low tone.

"Right, thanks Sergeant," he whispered back, turning off the alchemical light. "Everyone just hold steady."

"I'll be glad when this is over," one of the men growled. "Creeping around at night with hostile Arcans about."

"What, you scared of a few Arcans, Bezzle?" another teased.

"I seen a wild Arcan rip the legs off a cow, Golli, and in the night, they could right sneak right up on us. I don't much cotton to having my arms ripped off tonight."

"And you're drawin' 'em right to us with your talkin'," the Sergeant snapped.

"As soon as the scouts return, we'll move," the Lieutenant said in a calming whisper. "Remember, the man on the huge horse needs to be taken alive. The Arcans are to be put down."

"Who is this guy, Lieutenant?"

"We think it's a deserter from the enemy army. The General of that army is known to ride an Equar, and the farmers are certain the man they saw was on an Equar. It can't be a coincidence. The Major thinks the man stole the General's Equar and a few Arcans and he's heading for the mountains. If we can catch him, we can wring him for information."

Kyven silently cursed. His preference for Equars was a pattern, and while they didn't know it was a Shaman on that Equar, it was enough of a pattern for them to realize it and take action. He should have ridden a regular horse up here or covered his Equar in an illusion, but he loved riding Vasha too much to not bring her along. He'd been under an illusion

the entire ride up, concealing his identity, but he hadn't covered Vasha in an illusion of a horse. He hadn't considered that while Strider had a black coat and Vasha a gray one, people wouldn't realize they were two different Equars. Domesticated Equars were just too unusual, and he'd been blinded by his love of riding them.

He was about to pull Lightfoot back off the ridge, but they heard distant shouts, several shots, and then the discharge of a shockrod.

"God damn it, I told the scouts not to engage if they found them!" the Lieutenant barked, jumping up. "Move, move!"

"Go back to help Striker!" Kyven hissed at Fastpaw, who nodded and bounded off into the brush. He glanced at Lightfoot and smacked his fist into his hand, and she gave him a serious look and nodded. He pointed Ebony to the left and Lightfoot to the right, then he dropped down to all fours and scampered down the low ridgeline. There were several more shots, then an agonized scream from the direction of the camp, which made the Loreguard soldiers break into a trot. Kyven angled to meet the center of their formation, then he slid to a stop, rose up on his back legs, then channeled a withering blast of cold right into the middle of them. The pale blue cone of magical light illuminated the creek and narrow clearing in a ghostly light, startling the soldiers as the middle of their formation suddenly rimed over in frost, flash-frozen in place. Lightfoot struck before the men could even react, shooting the Lieutenant in the head with her pistol with one hand and literally blowing the head off the Sergeant with her shockrod in the other hand, the brilliant blast of light in the darkness making men flinch and cry out. Lightfoot dove aside as several blind shots were fired in her direction, and in that second, Ebony hit the column from the other side. She killed the last two men in the formation with the shockrod she'd been given, hitting them squarely in the back one after the other, then she slid behind a tree as the others in the back of the formation turned and fired at the source of that thunderclap, gouging several holes in the tree behind which she was hiding. Their diversions let Kyven reset his position safely, and he channeled a second blast of cold, which killed three more men, before dropping on all fours and bounding off to the side, getting out of the

origination of the cone and where the men who saw it would fire. He was melded to the shadows, impossible to see, and that was the only reason he managed to avoid their wildly searching eyes. He stayed out of the lines of fire of Lightfoot and Ebony as the remaining seven men ran for the trees, two more dying to their shockrods, but he turned and envisioned an illusion, beseeched the shadow fox for the power to cast it, and felt her connect to him. He created an illusion of himself in the direction the men were running, the glowing eyes of a Shaman staring at the men with a cold emerald radiance.

“Shaman!” one of the men screamed in a strangled voice, shooting his rifle from the hip. The other six men joined in, firing several shots at the illusion, which passed through it and caused the illusory Kyven to laugh scornfully, then raise hands crackling with lightning towards them. They turned to each side and tried to flee, but Kyven killed the ones fleeing towards Lightfoot with a third blast of cold, which seriously sapped his strength, while Ebony was waiting for the men running towards the trees in her direction. She stepped out from behind her tree and killed the three of them literally as they reached her, her short, strong claws ripping the life out of the men.

Lightfoot trotted up to him as he stood there with his hands on his knees, panting to recover. That spell always did seriously drain him, but it was the only spell he knew that could kill more than one person at a time that also wouldn't have set the whole forest on fire. “Alright?” she asked.

He nodded. “You know how that spell wears me out,” he replied. “Go see if Striker and Fastpaw need us. Me and Ebony will catch up in a few seconds.”

She nodded again and bounded back towards camp on all fours, as Ebony prowled the dead to make sure they were really dead. He got his breath back, then motioned to her, and they ran back to the camp to see what was going on. There was no more sounds of fighting, so it was probably over.

What was going on was they weren't needed at all. Four men were laid out at the edge of camp, and one of them had been mauled by the Lupans. The other three had been killed by rifles and a shockrod. Fastpaw was standing over the dead, a rifle in his hands, while Striker and Lucky were wrapping a bandage around Nightfall's forearm. "You alright?" Kyven asked in concern.

"I'm alright, I cut my arm on a tree branch," she replied.

"Good work, what happened?" he asked Striker.

"They tried to sneak up on us," he replied. "I shot the first one, then we traded fire for a few seconds, at least until Nightfall and the Lupans hit them from behind. They tried to move, and we picked them off."

"Are the Lupans alright? Sirra! Dauro!" Kyven shouted. He sighed in relief when the two dark-furred animals stalked out of the forest, Sirra carrying the lower leg of the man they'd mauled in her mouth. She dropped it like a playful puppy when Kyven hurried over, running his hands over them to check for any injuries.

"Pack the camp, we move," Lightfoot ordered. "Strip the dead of weapons. Nightfall can carry them back to the army tomorrow."

"Where did they get the rifles from?" Striker mused as he knelt by the man he'd shot.

"That is a good question," Kyven answered.

The group was far better armed than they expected, hinting that they thought Kyven was trouble. When they went back to where they'd killed the other men, they found that the Lieutenant that Lightfoot had shot had one of those revolvers Danvers had been talking about. Each cylinder of the revolver's drum was loaded with cap and ball, like a musket, but the revolver's action would allow the user to fire six shots before having to switch to another weapon. Kyven gave the revolver to Lightfoot, putting it to best use, and he handed out the alchemical weapons they'd been carrying to his nannies and Lucky. Five of them had been carrying shockrods, one

had a firetube—which were dangerous in the hands of the untrained—and all of them had been carrying impact rods. He took the unit's talker, then, after sizing up the dead, he stripped one of the men of his uniform, which wasn't easy since the man was still basically frozen solid, then took the Lieutenant's rank insignia off his uniform and put it on the uniform he'd taken. Nightfall winced when Kyven broke the man's arms off in order to pull off his uniform jacket, and about all of them had their hands shattered so they could get their rifles. They were definitely Briton rifles, but they were of a different design than the ones they were using, the stock shaped slightly differently and the barrel made of a square tube rather than a rounded one, the edge pointing up with a nib for the front sight. The barrel was also shorter than their rifles by nearly two hands, which meant they didn't have the same accuracy at great distance. They seemed a lower-quality kind of rifle, but they were bolt-action, they didn't have a lever underneath to load the rounds. The shooter had to manually work the bolt on top of the rifle to load the next round. They loaded from the bottom through a little gate rather than the side, since there wasn't a lever down there to block it. The bolt would make it a bit slower to fire than their long rifles, since the lever was close to the trigger and the shooter could jack the lever and fire off several shots in a quick spurt, but they were still an order of magnitude faster than muzzle-loading muskets. Even though they were obviously different designs, they fired the same size cartridge round. That made them useful. Right now, since some of their Arcans were armed with farm implements, every weapon they could bring back was another soldier armed.

"It's not like ours," Lucky said as he worked the bolt of the rifle in his hands, puzzling that out fairly quickly. "It's smaller, doesn't look as well made." He opened the bolt again, then pulled the bullet out of the breech. "It's the same kind of bullet we use. I think they're interchangeable."

"Probably from a different manufacturer, but the Britons demanded they use the same bullet so it would be easier to get ammunition for their different guns," Striker mused as he looked down the sights of another one, then worked the bolt as he saw Lucky had done, then he pulled the trigger

and sent a shot off high into the trees. He then worked the bolt again and fired again, then nodded. “But still better than a musket.”

“True enough,” Kyven agreed. “Take one if you want it, we’ll send the rest back to the army with Nightfall in the morning.”

“I will, these are smaller, a little easier to carry for me when I run,” Striker nodded, slinging the rifle over his shoulder.

“Alright, everyone. First, take off all their uniforms. Then we’ll hide the bodies, but keep any small parts you break off. Once we’re done, let’s find their horses,” Kyven said. “I have something of an idea. Lightfoot, help me go over the Lieutenant’s body, I need to know his name and unit.”

Their horses were picketed about half a minar from the battle, ground tethered in a small clearing just off the road. The horses nickered and edged a bit when they approached, since Kyven was still in Arcan form, but they calmed down when Kyven stroked the nose of the first horse he reached, crooning to it softly. “Everyone mount up, we’re taking the horses,” he declared.

“I don’t know how to ride one of those things,” Nightfall declared.

“Lucky, lead her,” Kyven said as he pulled into the saddle, hooking his claws on the edges of the stirrups since his feet wouldn’t easily fit in them. They led the horses away, the unriden horses tied together in a string that Striker led, and Kyven explained his new idea. “We’re going to use the attack to our advantage,” he told them. “Tomorrow morning I’ll ride into Foggy Peak wearing that uniform. This talker is the same kind used by the mounted patrols,” he said, holding it up. “That means this group wasn’t garrisoned at Foggy Peak. I got a good enough look at the man who gave me his uniform to take his place. I’ll spin a tale of inspection, that I’m there to investigate the Arcan sightings. Boys, Ebony, Lightfoot, I need you all to take the uniforms and set up something northwest of town. Tear the uniforms up, kill a deer or something, then scatter blood and ripped-up flesh all over the place along with those fingers and other little bits and pieces we took from the dead. That should salt the scene with a dash of truth. Make it

look like the men were torn apart in tiny little pieces, make it really gruesome.”

Lightfoot nodded as Ebony chuckled. “A horror scene?”

He nodded. “I want them to take every gun they have and point it in the wrong direction, and a nice little atrocity should do that. Nightfall, when you get back to the army, tell Danvers he has to get up here as fast as possible. He needs to hit them from behind while they’re all looking the wrong way.”

“I will.”

“I don’t like the idea of you going in there alone, Shaman,” Fastpaw said respectfully.

“I go in alone all the time, Fastpaw. It’s my job,” he replied evenly. “And pardon my saying it, but I’ll probably be safer alone. If I don’t have to watch out for anyone else, it gives me many more options.”

After they moved far enough away from where they killed the patrol, they settled in for a few hours of rest. Kyven and Striker stood guard, Kyven still in his Arcan form for its senses, but he wasn’t alone long. Nightfall wandered up to him and sat on the log beside him, looking him up and down. “I think you look much more handsome like that,” she noted.

He chuckled. “Clover says much the same thing,” he replied in a low tone, his glowing eyes looking down over the hill, a break in the trees giving him a good view of the road below. “Are you sure you can carry all those rifles back?”

“I can manage. I’m stronger than I look.”

“I want you to take one for yourself. Lucky can teach you to use it. Striker’s right, these rifles will be easier for Arcans to carry, and you don’t have to worry about accuracy at long distance. Not with your shadow powers,” he said with a slight, toothy smile. “I want you and Lucky to go through them and find the most accurate and best-made of the lot, and have

the Shaman start creating duplicates of it. Once they make the first duplicate, take it back and keep that rifle for yourself.”

“I’ll make sure of it,” she nodded. “Is this what you always do to the humans? Play tricks?”

He chuckled. “More or less. I’m a true shaman of my totem, Nightfall. Guile and deceit. Sometimes I’m amazed that I turned out like this, given the moral and straight-laced upbringing I had.”

“Perhaps that upbringing only masked your true self, and you express it with the mother.”

“That could be true,” he shrugged. “But it’s in the past. I don’t worry about those things now. I’ve chosen my path, and I’m quite content with it. In all ways. I am faithful to my totem, I have Danna, and I have people and Arcans who need me. For a Shaman, that’s our true calling.”

“Ah, Danna. I must meet her.”

“You can shadow walk now, you will,” he replied. “You’d like her. She’s much smarter than I am, and very brave and strong-willed. She’s also a good leader. The Arcans listen to her, believe in her. She took a bunch of Arcans and turned them into a real army, all in just a few months. That’s quite an accomplishment.”

“The humans wouldn’t act so. I’ve noticed they don’t think females are as smart as males.”

“A racial peculiarity,” he replied. “Human females are smaller and weaker than males on the average, so the males seem to think that since they’re inferior in that one way, then they’re inferior in *all* ways. A stupid assumption.”

“Truly,” she agreed.

“Arcan males tend to be larger and stronger than females, but at least the Arcans don’t think that makes females inferior...mainly because even

though she's weaker, the average Arcan female can kill a male if she gets testy enough," he chuckled. "Weaker doesn't necessarily mean weak."

"Ebony," Nightfall nodded.

"More like Lightfoot. She may be smaller and weaker than males, but I don't know a single male in the army that doesn't get out of her way when she walks by. And a rifle only needs enough strength to pull the trigger," he noted simply. "Guns make everyone equal, as long as they have the strength to aim and shoot."

Nightfall smiled lightly and looked up at him. "Toby says much the same thing about Lightfoot. He fears her in a way he can't completely articulate. He just says she has too much salt for the average man. I'm not sure what that means."

"It's an Alamari expression, it means she's too dangerous to mess with," he replied. "Trust Toby when he says things like that. He knows how to size someone up in a fight without doing any fighting."

Nightfall scooted a little closer, then patted him on the knee. "Show me the trick of making yourself a shadow again. I want to study it more," she asked.

"You never sit still, do you?" he chuckled.

"I'm not wasting this opportunity," she replied simply. "I have you all to myself, nobody asking you questions or pulling you away. We can both keep watch while you teach me."

"Well, when you put it that way," he said lightly. He demonstrated what she wanted to see and explained how it felt when he did it in great detail, then they got into a long discussion about the shadow world, so as to better arm her with knowledge the next time she shadow walked. He told her everything he knew about it in great detail, which, he realized, was far more than he realized that he knew. He'd come to understand the shadow world with an intimacy that surprised him when he sat down and talked about it. The shadow fox had told him that knowing their world would be

his protection, and he was surprised at just how much he did know about the shadow world. And he also knew that he still had a lot more to learn. She had told him that his safety lied in his understanding, and the shadow world was still a dangerous place to him.

It was a good time. Nightfall was an intelligent woman, and while they talked of the shadows at first, eventually they started talking about just about anything that crossed their minds. She was almost a nuisance in the army, asking everything of everyone, learning, learning, learning, learning anything anyone would teach her, and that aspect of her made her a brisk conversationalist. She was always pushing for the deeper meaning, trying to understand every aspect of a subject. Eventually the subject turned to Danna, and she listened intently as Kyven described his headstrong lover, describing the smart, strong, fierce woman behind the fur he loved, and the tale of finally wooing her, making her see the truth of his devotion to her.

“You don’t seem all *that* devoted,” she said with a slight smile. “You and Lightfoot spend a lot of time in the same bedroll.”

He chuckled ruefully. “Well, you know Arcans. They don’t see sex as necessarily part of love,” he answered. “Lightfoot doesn’t mind that I’m a human, she actually rather likes me in that way, and with her not touching Lucky for fear of getting pregnant, she needs *some* kind of release. Besides, I’m not stupid enough to tell Lightfoot no,” he said with a light chuckle. “Not that I’d want to. She’s very fun in bed, but she also understands my position.”

“What position?”

“Humans see sex *much* differently than Arcans. Women especially see sex as something exclusive to the relationship. Her man sleeps with her, and *only* with her. Danna’s not much different. She knows that I sleep with Lightfoot and doesn’t entirely like it, but unlike most human women, she understands the situation. She knows that my rather unique situation means she has to make a few sacrifices, and I make sure she knows how much I appreciate her doing it every time we see each other.”

“And how would you feel if she sought a male while you were gone?”

He chuckled ruefully. “I’d feel the same way she does,” he replied. “But, would I fly into a jealous rage? No. I can’t very well be angry with her for doing the same thing I’m doing. I wouldn’t like it, but I’d forgive her for it and move on. But, that would be if she sought out an *Arcan* male. If she was sleeping with another human, I’d probably feel much differently. I know she’d skin me alive if she found out I was sleeping around with a human woman. The Arcans she can understand, but if I took up with a human, she’d see that as a betrayal.”

“A curious distinction.”

“Humans are curious creatures,” he said with a slight smile. “And different humans have different standards. Some women wouldn’t abide me and Lightfoot, some women wouldn’t care at all. Lucky for me, I’ve found a woman with a little understanding of the situation.”

“Ah. So, when you fulfill your obligation to the mother and give Umbra another litter?”

“She’ll hate that even more than Lightfoot,” Kyven chuckled. “Umbra and Danna have some history.”

“Hmm. I wonder how she’ll feel about me.”

“What?”

“Think, Kyven. If the mother is trying to start a new breed of Arcan, just you and Umbra and Danna and me and Toby won’t be enough. Toby needs to have kits by Umbra, you by me. Danna should also have kits by both you and Toby, give our children as many options for mates as possible, but from what I know of that, it won’t happen.”

“No, it won’t,” Kyven agreed. And he had to agree, Nightfall was probably right. The shadow fox would try to trap him into an agreement to father Arcan children by Nightfall as well as Danna and Umbra, then beat her head against the wall that would be Danna when it came time to try to

trap her into having children by Toby. She was already having enough problems just getting Danna to have Arcan kits by Kyven, trying to make her have kids by a father not her husband would go directly against almost every human moral Danna possessed, and she'd dig her heels in like a Ursorax and wouldn't budge no matter what the shadow fox threatened. Danna would live out her life as an Arcan before she had kids by someone other than Kyven, because at least Kyven would accept her as an Arcan and she knew it. She would lose nothing by staying an Arcan, because Kyven would always love her, no matter what she looked like. "Well, at least I'd enjoy the company," he told her with a smile.

"So would I," she returned, putting her clawed hand on his thigh, and she didn't move it. "Toby's a good man, fun in bed, but I'd never stay with him. We both know that. Once he gives me my children, he'll return to his human body and I'll move on. At least you're part of our world forever, Kyven. You will always be here, be you human or Arcan."

"I guess I will be," he agreed with a rueful smile. "She owns me, Nightfall. Body and soul."

"And how much does it bother you?"

"Not as much as it used to," he answered. "As long as I can do something to help, as long as I can be a Shaman, I can live with it. I'll endure it so long as the Arcans and the humans need me."

"And why would the humans need you, Kyven?"

"I was born human, Nightfall. There has to be a reason for it. The humans need Shaman now, else I'd never have been born. I'm not entirely sure what role I'll play, or the others after me, but the spirits are wiser than we are. We can only do as they command and wait to see how their wisdom comes to pass in time."

She gave him a slight smile. "And the mother's wisdom?"

"Oh, I can already see where that's going, and I agree with it," he answered. "This war was inevitable. In a way, it's long overdue. The

Loremasters are now a threat to the humans as well as the Arcans, and they have to be stopped. The shadow fox saw that earlier than the other spirits, and that's why I've done the things I've done to make it happen. The Arcans have to fight for their freedom or the humans will never let them go, and the humans have to take out the Loremasters before they bring ruination to Noraam. And it *has* to be the humans. If the Arcans destroyed the Loremasters, then they'd just rebuild and be back in ten or twenty years, as well as there being an unending war between the humans and Arcans that would only end with the total destruction of one race or the other. This way, with the humans being the ones to take them down, they won't reform. The kingdoms will be independent of a controlling overlord. I know it means that there will be wars and hardship, kingdoms like Carin and Hamm and Menn will probably fall to a larger neighbor, and there will be famines and pestilence when the farms go unworked because the Arcans are gone, but it has to be done. I don't have to like it, but it has to be done. That's part of the weight that comes with the wisdom of a Shaman," he sighed. "There's a great deal of hardship coming for the humans, but they have to endure it, else they'll never learn to do for themselves, they'll never be what they were supposed to be. Sometimes the most important lessons are the harshest."

"Spoken like a true Shaman," Nightfall said with a pat on his thigh.

"I'm not sure if that's a complement or not," he teased.

"I'll let you figure that out," she winked.

The others were up before sunrise, and they broke camp while Kyven helped Nightfall back to the army, shadow walking with her while carrying the rifles and equipment, more than she could easily carry herself. Besides, it was another opportunity to teach, this time within the shadow world, as Kyven explained what they saw and felt and sensed, how their awareness of the shadows extended into the shadow world as a sixth sense that far surpassed the other five. Kyven was aware of all the movements of the things within the shadow world, how far away they were and which way they were moving, and they paused inside long enough for Nightfall to get a

better sense of them, what they *felt* like, so she could better keep track of them when she was there alone. In that way, the shadow fox was right that understanding the shadow world kept them alive, for him being able to keep track of the *things* kept him from getting killed. Once they got back to the army, Kyven turned over one of the rifles the Loreguard was carrying to Patience for her to take to the others and duplicate, and also told them they'd have that pistol for them to duplicate when Lightfoot returned to the army.

Once he returned, he mounted up on one of the Loreguard's horses, in the Loreguard's uniform, wearing an illusory face that concealed his true identity, then he cantered out onto the road and towards Foggy Peak. Lucky was already on the way back to the army with Vasha and the other Loreguard horses—horses were in big demand, and every new horse they brought in was less for the other horses to carry—and they were giving him a lot of responsibility by letting him go by himself. Then again, the advance scouts of the army were only half a day behind, so he wouldn't have to go very far on his own before he was safe. Lightfoot almost rebelled when Kyven gave that order, but he cowed her with a single cool look and the question with no answer, “don't you trust him, Lightfoot?” That was a question she *dare* not answer in front of him, else she'd mortally offend the young male who was trying so hard to prove himself. Kyven had given him his first real job that had real responsibility, taking his precious Equar back to the army along with the other horses, and the young cat took that responsibility very seriously. Lightfoot glared death at him for nearly a full minute after Lucky galloped off on Vasha, the shockrod he'd been giving in hand, one of the Loreguard rifles slung over his shoulder, and the other horses being led in a tether line. Kyven wasn't impressed by Lightfoot's anger, swatting her on the rump and sending the Arcans out to do their jobs, to scout and make some noise northwest of town to draw the militia and any Loreguard in the village out of Danvers' way.

Kyven rode into Foggy Peak with one of the captured rifles in his saddle boot, and saw a village in fear. The streets were nearly deserted, and what few were on the streets were men boarding up windows or building

barricades between the buildings, or filling barrels of water to put out fires. They definitely knew something was coming. Kyven was stopped the first citizen he came across. "Thank the Trinity!" the man said, seeing him. "Where are the Loreguard, Lieutenant?"

"The patrol is investigating something we saw on the way in, I came ahead alone," he replied. "I need to talk to whoever's in charge of defense here. We saw some things last night I have to pass on."

"Well hell, we need them here," the man said. "And I'm the man you need to see. Mayor Tomlin Barker," he said, offering his hand. Kyven shook it. "Word came up from Longdale that there's an enemy army approaching."

"I haven't seen them," he answered. "What we saw you need to know about is a large number of armed Arcans west of the village, moving north. We encountered them south of here and chased them into the western hills, but we were repulsed by a much larger force of them. Perhaps what we saw is this army Longdale saw, a large number of escaped Arcans moving towards the hills?"

"Maybe," he replied with a frown. "There's Arcans running around everywhere. Word from the south is they're ransacking every farm and plantation they come across and freeing all the Arcans."

"They are," Kyven affirmed. "They have men on horseback running in front of the main army, looting everything they can get their hands on and freeing every Arcan they can find."

"Why on earth would they do that?"

"To deny the Loreguard Arcans to help build fortifications and cause general chaos in what is to them hostile territory," he answered evenly. "It's a viable tactic. I can admire it if wasn't being used against us," he frowned. "The Arcans we chased might pass your village by, or they might raid it for supplies. Either way, you need to know they're there."

"Why are they moving north?"

“The Cuman Pass, I’d wager,” Kyven replied. “Even the Arcans know about it. If I were crossing the mountains, I’d do it there. Now show me your preparations, I’ll give you as much help as I can before I have to go back.”

“Can you have them send us some men?”

“I’ll see about it,” he said, taking out the talker he’d taken. Kyven knew all the words and terms when the Loreguard talked to each other on the talkers, so he didn’t arouse any suspicion as he called back to the main controller and asked for reinforcements to be sent to Foggy Peak.

“No men can be dispatched to Foggy Peak at this time,” the captain that took over for the controller answered.

“I understand that, sir, but we have a problem over here,” Kyven answered. “There’s a large number of armed Arcans on the loose, more than the men I have on hand can handle.”

“Word from command is that it’s only a diversion, Lieutenant, but if it’s as large as you say, then the civilians are in danger. Take command and order all citizens to evacuate to Rallan. Have your men do everything they can to assist and protect the civilians as they pack up and move. After that, Lieutenant, you are to fire the village to deny it the enemy. We’ll send a relief column back out to rebuild the village after the main army is defeated.”

“Understood, sir,” Kyven answered, a bit grudgingly. Secretly, however, he was quite satisfied with that command, for it solved the only real problem he had...the possibility of resistance from the residents of the village. With them out of the way, their army could take up residence, split up as it intended to do, have a day or two of rest with access to buildings, then move on after DeVaur got his ass kicked at Durm.

However, the tactics of it seemed unusual. The Loreguard should have told him to dig in and fight for everything he was worth to make the enemy army believe their diversion was working, so as to take DeVaur by surprise

when he attacked the defensive lines east of Rallan. By abandoning the village, they were warning DeVaur that they were on to him. But, perhaps the Loreguard generals around here were actually humane, and cared more about the lives of civilians than they did the battle plan. Not every Loreguard officer was a heartless bastard.

“Burn down Foggy Peak? Hell no!” Barker said angrily.

“I agree,” Kyven said darkly, putting the talker away. “But, your people do need to evacuate, Mayor. If the enemy is sending a force up here to cause a diversion, then that means they intend to attack, and there will be too many for the men we have on hand to be able to fight off. The best thing to do is to get your people to safety. Just take everything of value, leave nothing for the enemy. I won’t fire the village, because I think a few well placed traps set here and there within the buildings would give them a little something to think about when they ride in here.”

“I like the way you think, Lieutenant,” Barker grinned.

“Let’s get to work.”

It took the residents about six hours to pack up what they could, placed in wagons, carts, or on the backs of Arcans that Kyven hated to let go...but there was little he could do for them right now. While they did that, the scouts that the Mayor had put out encountered what they reported were scores of Arcans, but were really just four making a lot of noise and tormenting the clumsy scouts just a little bit. One of the scouts did eventually find the scene they’d set up and reported it back to the Mayor, which the scouts reported as a massacre of Loreguard soldiers, which Kyven said had to have been from his patrol, either being chased off or lured into the forest, where they were killed. The mayor and Kyven went out to the scent, which was just as gory and horrific as Kyven had ordered it to be. There was blood and bits of flesh everywhere, about two rods of purple entrails hanging from a tree, and an eyeball sitting on a small rock. The mayor vomited almost immediately upon taking in the scene, but Kyven paced along the edge of the small clearing, seeming to study the

horrific red stained grass. He knelt down and picked up a button, then clutched it in his hand. “My unit,” he growled, then he jumped to his feet. “Back to the village! We have to get out of here!”

“What kind of monsters could do that to a man?” the mayor asked in a weak tone as they hurried back along the path leading to the village.

“It had to be the Arcans we saw, creating that diversion my commander mentioned, trying to scare you into calling for the army to come to Foggy Peak. And for them to do that to men as good as mine, there has to be hundreds of them.”

“Well, it would have worked,” the mayor stated, wiping his mouth.

“They’ll attack the village when they realize we’re not taking the bait, forcing us to play the hand,” Kyven said. “So we have to get out of here, Mayor, as fast as possible. I don’t think I can protect the entire village alone.”

After the six hours, Kyven was quite unhappy with the pace of things. The villagers wanted to all but dig their houses out of the ground and haul them off with them. The idea that it was supposed to be an emergency evacuation was lost on them, so he spurred them along with a little illusory reinforcement. He created audial illusions, sounds of howling, baying, growling, the rustle of many trees to make it sound like there was an entire army of Arcans moving to surround the village. He let that unsettle them, then he added illusions of shadowy Arcan shapes moving in the trees just outside the village. That got the reaction he wanted, causing the frightened villagers to speed things up considerably. Kyven paced and barked commands while the villagers got moving, telling them over and over to go straight for Rallan and not to stop unless it was life and death...because stopping very well might get them killed.

When the last of the villagers was finally on the move, the mayor rode up to where Kyven was standing by a crystalcutter’s shop, his eyes even in the illusion showing a little wistful nostalgia. “Lieutenant, we’ve got everyone going. It’s going to take you a little time to get up to the front.”

“I’m not going anywhere, mayor,” he said in a pleasant tone, turning around.

“Sir, you can’t fight them all yourself!” he protested.

“I’m not going to fight anyone, Mayor Barker,” he replied, reaching down and taking off his boots, one by one. The move confused the mayor, who turned his horse to get a better position. “You’d best get going. You’ll be safe in Rallan.”

“You’re worrying me a little, Lieutenant.”

“Nothing to worry about,” he said, reaching up and touching his chest, while under the illusion he put his fingers to his amulet. He dismissed the illusion even as he changed, and the Mayor gasped in shock and nearly fell off his horse as the human Loreguard officer was replaced by a black-furred Arcan. The mayor’s eyes widened and he very nearly lost control of his bladder when he realized that his horse was standing not ten rods from the infamous black fox Shaman. “Now get back to your villagers, Mayor. They’re going to need you on the trip to Rallan,” Kyven said, his eyes glowing a steady emerald.

“S-S-Shaman!” the mayor screamed, then sawed his horse’s reins and galloped away. Kyven just watched the man gallop away, joining the tail end of the caravan heading for Rallan. A few men armed with old muskets looked to turn around to try to kill him, but just the sight of the Shaman standing there, calm and cool and staring at them, made them lose their nerve, and they hurried back to the tail end of the host.

Kyven took a talker out of his uniform and turned it on. “Danvers.”

The answer was almost immediate. “Yes, Shaman?”

“Foggy Peak is empty. The Loreguard ordered the civilians to Rallan, and I just helped them along. The Loreguard flat out said that the attack here is nothing but a diversion. You’d better warn DeVaur that they know he’s coming, and they’ll probably be all kinds of ready for him.”

“I’ll relay it,” Danvers replied. “Our advance scouts are about four hours out from the village. Poke around and see if there’s anything we can use there.”

“We can do that. Did Lucky make it back?”

“He’s almost back. The scouts found him about two hours ago, and a couple are helping him bring those horses in. And they’ve already duplicated about twenty of those new rifles, the Shaman say they’re much easier to duplicate than the long rifles.”

“I’ll keep my long rifle, thank you,” Kyven said with a chuckle. “I bet it’s far more accurate.”

“At range, yes, but for Arcans, those shorter rifles are almost perfect,” Danvers replied. “Since the entire idea for Arcans is to get close, that added accuracy isn’t as important as it is for our line infantry and cavalry.”

“True. We should have plenty of time to split the army and send the Arcans that can’t fight into the frontier, as well as get a little rest. I get the feeling that DeVaur’s going to get bogged down, and we can’t get *too* far ahead of him.”

“True enough,” Danvers agreed.

Kyven called in the others with an illusory flare of light over the village, then he got to work. He and his nannies and Lightfoot went through the buildings, taking out anything the army could use, as well as deciding to convert the village’s common building into a command post for Danvers. Almost every village in the Free Territories had one, which served as an office for the Mayor, a meeting place for the Village Council, and a place for village assemblies, usually outside by the building. They had a common building here as well, which looked like it served as a combination school and church, but it would be perfect for Danvers to set out his maps and strategize with his advising officers.

At sunset, the army arrived. Kyven was sitting beside the common building at a little fire pit they had there with the others, Sirra and Dauro

laying idly by the fire, a deer roasting over the fire for Danvers' benefit. Danvers rode up atop Strider and looked down at them, then chuckled. "And here I thought you'd be hard at work."

"We all deserve a little rest once in a while," he replied. "Come on over and have some venison, it should be done."

"At least you remembered to cook it," he grinned.

"Only for you, Wilson," Kyven replied dryly. "But I won't be here long. I need one of those new rifles. I'm going to take it to Danna for the army to duplicate."

"George, go get one of the original rifles they brought back," Danvers ordered one of his captains.

"Yessir," he replied, then turned his horse and cantered back towards the main host, which was still flowing into the village.

Kyven did show Danvers around, showed him the building to set up his command post, then watched as the army began to settle in. There were far too many to fit in the 37 buildings of the village, so the buildings went to the officers while the army set up camp in the large clearing east of the village, the road to Rallan winding down the hill. They didn't just set up their tents, however, for Danvers ordered them to dig in, build fortifications at the edge of the tents and around the village, to protect against a possible counter-attack. To the west were a few mines, all but one abandoned, so Lightfoot told Danvers when she described the local terrain, and Danvers had that single mine investigated and any raw crystals found in carts or easily pulled from the walls brought back and put with their inventory. Hunting parties were sent out, and everyone settled into the routine of building camp and digging trenches.

After the army got started, Kyven took one of the smaller rifles and entered the shadow world. He cast about, looking for Danna, and found her almost immediately. She walked through a shadow for a moment, and that was all he needed. He took all of two steps and converged a gateway back

into the real world, paused a moment for anyone on the other side to take notice of it, then stepped through even as he willed it to pass over him. He stepped out into a small clearing that he recognized almost immediately, for it was at the edge of what Kyven would call Atan's territory. It was at the base of a shallow cut in the side of one of the taller hills west of the village, where a runoff stream flowed when it rained but was dry otherwise. There was a small clearing at the base of that cut, and that was where Danna was, sitting atop her horse with Firetail standing by it, pointing at a wagon and barking orders. It was one of the supply wagons they'd brought from Haven, part of the logistics of moving an army. There was a loose string of wagons just like that one trailing all the way back to Vanguard, bringing in food, supplies, uniforms, and raw materials. There were similar supply lines running back from DeVaur's army and the Loreguard army, because an army usually couldn't survive on simple forage the way Danvers' army was. Then again, their army was much smaller than these other armies, and they'd been looting plantations all but overflowing with food on top of the meat brought in by the hunters.

"Kyven!" Danna said happily, giving him a toothy smile.

"I see you're almost there," he said as he approached.

"We should be in Atan tomorrow morning," she replied. "Then we dig in like there's no tomorrow and send out the regiments to take and hold the passes and villages."

"Firetail, can you call in the Shaman who mainly duplicate things?" he asked. "We captured something you absolutely have to have." He held up the short rifle.

"Another Briton gun?" Danna asked.

He nodded. "We killed a mounted patrol armed with these rifles. This one's easier to duplicate, and easier for the Arcans to carry on the move. It's not as accurate as the long rifles, but as Danvers pointed out, that's not as much of an issue for Arcans."

“Both are useful,” Firetail said. “Even an army that prefers close quarters should be able to fight effectively from a distance.”

“Well said,” Kyven said. “These use the same bullets as the long rifles, so there’s no worry about running out of ammo.”

He warned Danvers and the others he’d be staying the night, then he sat down with Firetail and Danna and had a nice dinner. Firetail cooked Danna’s meat, both since Danna refused to eat it raw and Danna liked her cooking. They caught him up on the march from Deep River to Atan, how their scouts had watched the Loreguard army march out from a distance, and how a group had followed Taggan Wild and a small group that had run for Two Rivers to report the shocking news to the Loremasters. He told them about the upcoming battle between the Loreguard and the combined Flauren and Georvan armies, how DeVaur was going to march right into the throat of stiff resistance all because he’d had his ego bruised.

They weren’t alone for long. At the end of the meal. Kyven sensed someone moving around in the shadow world, and both he and Danna looked over at the same time as a shadow gateway converged at the edge of their small clearing. Nightfall stepped out, and Kyven had to laugh when Toby staggered out behind her, stumbling about woozily, his face looking like he was struggling to keep his stomach. “Ayah,” he burped menacingly, which just made Nightfall give him an amused look. “That wasn’t a fun trip.”

“I told you,” was all Nightfall said, pushing some of her thick fan of black hair back over her shoulder.

“Teaching him?” Kyven asked.

“She can shadow walk?” Danna asked in surprise.

Kyven nodded. “She figured it out yesterday. Well, since you two are here, stay. I could use your help, Toby.”

“Sho’. What’s up?”

“We’re going into Atan tonight,” he replied. “I want to look it over, and we’re going to assess the Loreguard for Danna so she knows what’s going on.”

“Sho’, Ah can do that, mah friend,” he replied, standing back up and looking much better. “Ah’d rather stay heah than go back in theah anyway,” he growled, his accent worsening, which made Nightfall chuckle.

“You get used to it,” Kyven told him. “By the way. Danna, this is Nightfall. Nightfall, this is General Danna Pannen of the Arcan army.”

“The other female,” Nightfall said with a nod. “Kyven thinks highly of you.”

“He complements you as well,” Danna said, a bit guardedly. No doubt images of Umbra were rolling through Danna’s head at that moment. Umbra and Danna had fought like rabid cats, so Kyven was fairly sure that Danna wasn’t going to be all that friendly to Nightfall, at least not at first.

“Well, come come, sit with us,” Firetail smiled. “I haven’t seen you in a while, Toby. That fur fits you well.”

Toby laughed. “Ah’m gettin’ used tah it,” he replied, patting his bare chest; both he and Nightfall were naked.

Danna watched Nightfall out of the corner of her eye, but the female was quiet and quite sedate, just watching and listening and learning, always learning. She complemented Firetail on her cooking and listened to Danna and Firetail catch up with the hunter since he left Haven, content to sit at the edge of obvious interconnected relationships about the fire that didn’t include her. When Firetail asked her questions, she answered calmly and completely, not trying to be deceptive or coy, and Kyven could see that the intelligence in her words had put Danna back a little bit. Umbra was smart, in her way, but she talked like a hyper child most of the time. Nightfall was calm and measured, and she was quite observant and sharp, asking several questions about the army and how it worked that made Danna’s furry brows raise. Nightfall had learned a hell of a lot about soldiering by hanging

around Danvers and the command staff, and she showed that she knew how to apply what she'd learned.

Hardstep approached as they finished their meal, the big Shaman smiling broadly and all but crushing Kyven in a bear hug. "We've duplicated the first of those new rifles, Firetail, General," he reported. "Jumper assures us they can have a few dozen ready by morning. They're much simpler than the longer rifles."

"Alright, let's give them to the advance units," Danna said. "Kyven, can you show them how to use them?"

"Easily," he shrugged. "Anyone trained to a long rifle can use the new one after about fifteen minutes, they just have to learn how to load them and get the hang of the bolt. Everything else basically works the same."

"How are they different?" Firetail asked.

"The short rifles load from underneath, not the side. And the short rifles don't have a reload lever, you have to work the bolt on top. That ejects the spent cartridge and loads the next round."

"Ayah, Ah think Ah'll sit in and learn, Ah think Ah might want one of those new rifles. They look easier to carry."

"Then let's get it done," Kyven said. "Brother, can you round up some of the ones that need to learn?"

"Certainly," he answered, then rumbled off.

"Don't fire them," Danna warned. "We're too close to Atan, the Loreguard might hear the shots."

Kyven nodded. "They don't have to actually shoot them to learn how they work. Come on, Toby. You and Nightfall have something very special to do."

"What?"

“Subdue Atan without killing a single man. The three of us are going to go there. I’ll explain it when we start for the village.”

It took about an hour for them to round up a class, get the rifles that had just been duplicated and oiled, then show them how they worked. Kyven hadn’t actually fired one, but he’d seen them in use, and knew how they worked from playing with them after capturing them from the patrol. He showed the group of about fifty Arcans how to load them, then explained the bolt action to them, stressing that they had to make *damn* sure they locked the bolt before they tried to shoot it. He didn’t know what would happen if someone tried to shoot without pulling the bolt lever down after pulling it back into the ready position, and he didn’t *want* to know.

After training the class, who would then train anyone else who needed to learn, Kyven, Toby, and Nightfall stalked off into the young night, heading for Atan. Nightfall would investigate the mines and perimeter of the village, looking for defensive fortifications and traps, while Toby checked the village proper. Kyven was going to just walk in and call a council meeting, tell them what was going on, and see where the chips fell. Toby’s job after he checked the village would be to capture any council members that ran for the Loreguard once they found out that the Arcans were coming. It was a rather underhanded thing to do, but Kyven was an underhanded sort of person.

As he walked into the village under an illusion, however, eyed warily by several Loreguard soldiers standing at the village entrance, he felt a pang of nostalgia roll through him. He stepped onto the main thoroughfare, Sun Street, down which the shop where he’d grown up and learned his trade was located, he looked around even as he dismissed his illusion and sadly realized that Atan was doomed. It had many craftsmen, but its lifeblood was the mines. When the mines were played out, when they couldn’t find any more deposits, then Atan would wither away and die. Men, women, families, generations of families would have their entire history vanish, almost overnight, and be forced to either move down into the Blue Valley and take up farming, or pack up and move away. The miners, he knew, would try other mining villages, maybe even take up prospecting in the less

traveled areas, desperate to find more crystals, desperate to take up their livelihood, which was both harsh and demanding. Some of them might even take up mining other things, like coal or iron ore, since both were quite useful and well in demand. But there was no coal anywhere near Atan. The coal in the Smoking Mountains was to the southwest, on the other side of the range, so those miners would have to leave, establish a new village deep in the mountains, to try their hand at mining coal. Mining was all men like his father had ever known, and without it, they wouldn't know what to do.

Men like Virren and Timble, however.... Kyven sighed. The craft of crystalcutting was truly doomed. When the natural crystals were gone, there would only be Shaman-made crystals, and those didn't really need to be cut with any real skill. Timble and the apprentices, and men like them all up and down Noraam, they would see their income and their prestige evaporate. They would be men with skills that no longer mattered, and too old to learn another craft. They would become manual laborers, farmhands, taking any job they could find just to survive, and no doubt bitterly remembering the power and prestige they once had as being one of the most important trade craftsmen in Noraam. A crystalcutter ranked only under an alchemist when it came to prestige. Ironically, the alchemists would survive. Even if there were only Shaman-made crystals left, the ability to build alchemical devices would always be in demand. While the number of alchemists would drop sharply due to the lack of crystals, the trade itself would survive. And those alchemists that left the trade had all the skills they needed to be excellent blacksmiths, so they could simply change trades and start making horseshoes and knives and other iron implements. The blacksmiths wouldn't like the sudden swarm of alchemists applying for entry into the Blacksmith, Silversmith, and Artificer's Guild, but the alchemists would survive the coming changes relatively unscathed. They wouldn't have starving families and be forced to do humiliating work far beneath their skills like the cutters would.

Atan was doomed. How long would the village last? Ten years? Twenty? Would the people who left here remember the village and the friends and the society they had after five years gone, or would they simply

melt into their new communities and try to forget the past? It was a melancholy train of thought. It was here, walking the streets of the village he had called home, that the true impact of what was coming finally hit him. The humans, their entire way of life, it was about to be disrupted...maybe even destroyed. Thousands, tens of thousands, they were going to die in the war. And ten times that number were going to die in the famine and pestilence that stalked in on the heels of that war, once the Arcans were gone and humanity had to fend for itself. How many of the people he knew in this village were going to starve to death? How many would die of the pox, or the red fever? An entire way of life was on the brink of extinction, and humanity would be forced to embrace a new way, or wither away and die. And if they did, the Arcans would simply move into Noraam and take it over, and the entire civilization that once existed here would perish from the earth. Oh, humanity would survive across the Angry Sea in Eusica and Fria, but an entire branch of human civilization would be gone.

And it would all be on his shoulders. He was the one stirring up the war, he was the one his spirit had sent to get it all started in the first place. In the end, it might come down to the destruction of the human civilization of Noraam being wholly and completely his responsibility. That was a grim thought, but it didn't sway him that much. It would be a tragedy and would probably stain his soul for eternity, but it just had to be done. Humanity couldn't go on like this, not when they did it treading on the skulls of the Arcans they slaughtered. The civilization of Noraam was built on slavery and pain and cruelty, and while he would feel forever marked for bringing about the destruction of an entire people and maybe a million lives lost because of him, he could not mourn the loss of the society those people represented. The way the humans on Noraam treated Arcans was *evil*, and that evil had to be confronted and destroyed.

No matter the cost.

“Kyven? Kyven Steelhammer!” Ingram Blackanvil said with quiet voice but an excited grin, rushing up and shaking Kyven's hand. Ingram was a blacksmith, the best one in the village, and the only one in the village that had his own forge to produce iron stock and specialty equipment.

Ingram's forge could produce musket barrels, pig iron, and produced cast iron stoves many in the village used for both heating and cooking, those who couldn't afford alchemical stoves and heaters, anyway.

"Hello, Master Ingram," Kyven said with a calm, gentle voice, patting the man's huge, burn-scarred hand. "How have you been?"

"Both busy and not. What are you doing here? The Loremasters are hunting for you! I saw a wanted poster for you when I went to Avannar on guild business!"

"Oh, I'm sure they are," he said with a rueful smile. "They'd like nothing better than to hang me over a fire and slow roast me for a couple of days."

"Whatever did you do, Kyven?" he asked.

"I'll explain it later. Master Ingram, would you be so kind as to do me a favor?"

"Surely."

"Would you go around and gather up all the men on the council and have them meet me in the Crystal Chimes? Wake them up if you have to. There's something we need to talk about."

Ingram gave him a suddenly serious look. "Well, I guess I can do that, Kyven. You're officially calling council?"

"Yes. And I appreciate it, Master Ingram." Kyven patted him fondly on the shoulder, then turned and walked down the street, heading in the direction of the Crystal Chimes.

Junni smiled broadly and all but ran up to him when he stepped in, and he gave her a smile and patted her arm. He told her that the council was coming, and they needed to pull some tables together. It took a little rearranging with some of the patrons already there, many of whom tried to get Kyven to sit with them and tell him where he'd been, but they got a little curious when Junni and Gorvath helped him move tables to bunch

them around the stage. The council members started showing up in singles and pairs, and Virren and Timble rushed in soon after they started. Timble gave him a rough hug and happy greeting, and Virren shook his hand. “Why didn’t you tell us you were back, Kyv?” Timble asked with a laugh.

“I just arrived, as in just a few minutes ago. I’m glad you’re here. Did Ingram come get you?”

Virren nodded. “He said you called council. That it was important. Since you’re technically *on* the council, they can’t just blow it off.” Any council member could call council, at any time, and the other council members were expected to show up when it happened. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain it when the council gets here,” he replied. “Will the Loreguard try to crash the meeting?”

“I doubt it. They hang out at the Three Boars, Gorvath discourages them from coming here because they get too rowdy.”

“How many of them are here?”

“A couple hundred,” Timble replied. “They’re camped out up the mining road a bit, where the pens used to be.” Those pens were empty now. Most of the Arcans had been sold, or stolen by Virren’s agents. There were only about twenty Arcans left in the village, and they were mainly house servants that were kept all but under lock and key by their fearful owners.

“Alright. There is something I want both of you to know, right now,” he said with a grim look. “When you get back to your shops, either pack up and leave, or get in the cellar.”

Virren scowled, and Timble looked a bit nervous. “That’s it, then?”

Kyven nodded gravely.

“Shit. I thought we had more time,” Timble grunted.

“Time’s up, Tim,” Kyven sighed.

The rest of the council ambled in over about a half an hour, and once they were all there, he had Gorvath bar the door before he got up on the stage. “Thanks for everyone coming so quickly,” he said.

“What’s going on, Kyv?” Torvik asked.

“About two minars west, there’s an army of Arcans camped,” he replied with a steady look. “They’re going to attack the Loreguard stationed in the village just before dawn.” The men started shouting and calling out, but he quelled them with a few sharp shouts and raising his hands. “They’re not here to attack the *village*,” he stressed. “They’re after the Loreguard.”

“How the hell do you know that, Kyven?” Yevn demanded.

“Because I’m part of that army,” he said simply. “I came ahead to scout out the Loreguard and warn the village, so no villagers get caught up in it.”

“*You*? You’re helping Arcans?” Gardner Bell boomed.

“Yes, I’m helping the Arcans, Master Gardner,” Kyven replied evenly, staring right at him. “I’ve been out in the world. I’ve seen what’s really going on, and when this war started, I chose the side I thought was in the right. You gentlemen have no idea what the Loremasters are really doing, but I’ve seen it with my own eyes. They’ve betrayed all of Noraam.”

That made the men grumble and glare, but none of them shouted him down or tried to leave...at least not yet. “I’d like to know how you came to that conclusion, Kyven,” Tenn Chandler said in his soft voice.

“I can explain it in detail later, if that’s what you want,” he replied. “But for right now, let’s focus on what’s about to happen. The Arcans don’t want to hurt any of the villagers, so they want you to stay off the streets and under good cover. In cellars, in the middle of houses, so a stray musket ball can’t come through a wall and hurt someone. We need to spread the word, but we have to do it *quietly*. If the Loreguard get word of what’s about to happen, they’re going to dig in. And what’s worse, they may take up positions in the houses and force the Arcans to come in or burn the houses

down. That won't just get innocent people killed, it's going to do serious damage to the village."

"Why shouldn't we warn the Loreguard?" Plavis Handspan snapped.

"Because they're going to get wiped out no matter what happens, and I don't want to see the village where I grew up wiped out with them," Kyven said bluntly. "There are close to two hundred thousand Arcans coming east, Master Plavis. Didn't you notice all the deer and other animals fleeing towards the valley? The approaching Arcans have flushed them out of the forest."

"That's impossible!" Yevn shouted. "There aren't that many Arcans up here, and all the ones rebelling are down in Carin and Georvan!"

"I can take you to them, if you want," Kyven offered. "I'll *show* them to you. When you see that army, you'll all admit that they're going to defeat the Loreguard and take the village."

"You said take the village," Ingram grunted. "For what?"

"Their plan is to take and hold the east edge of the mountains to prevent the Loreguard from marching west," Kyven answered. "Atan is at the end of the road from Avannar itself, so this is a very important strategic position. Whoever holds Atan controls the path through the mountains west of here. It's not really a pass, but there is a way through the mountains between here and Deep River. I know, I've traveled it myself. The Arcans know about it, and so does the Loreguard. They're defending that route by holding its eastern terminus."

"So, the Arcans intend to capture and hold the village, but they don't want to hurt any of the citizens," he told them. "When they get here, you'll find the Arcans to be polite and careful. They're not going to barge into your houses, they're not going to steal your food or your things, and if you want to leave, they'll let you go."

"Well, I don't believe you!" Plavis shouted, standing up.

“Believe him, Plavis,” Virren said in a calm voice. “He’s telling the truth.”

“How would you know?”

“Because,” he said, then he sighed. “Because I’m part of the Masked.”

There was a collective gasp that rippled across the room.

“I’ve been in contact with the Arcan army approaching Atan for over a month,” he declared simply. “Those Arcans aren’t the ones we’ve been hearing rumors about, the ones freed from farms and villages. These are different Arcans. All the Arcans over the years that have escaped and fled into the mountains are coming back, and they’re part of that army.”

“Ain’t no way Arcans could pull off shit like that,” Plavis snapped.

“They’re being led by a *human*,” Kyven replied calmly. “I’m not the only human in that army that’s coming, Master Plavis. We know what the Loremasters are doing, and we’re trying to stop them.”

“What *are* they doing, then?” the mayor asked, finally speaking up.

“Simply put, they’re trying to take over all of Noraam, dissolve the kingdoms, and rule the continent the way the great ancients did,” he replied. “That’s what all these Loreguard are all about, gentlemen. Ask yourself this very simple question. If the Loremasters weren’t expecting to go to war, why are there *so many* Loreguard soldiers now? I know you’ve heard the rumors. Tens of thousands of them camped at Riyan, and even more to the south. Why do the Loremasters need so many soldiers unless they intended to *use* them?”

“They’re using them against the Arcans,” Plavis reasoned. “Ain’t you heard? There’s some Arcan rebellion down in Carin!”

“And what about the Flaurens? Didn’t you hear rumors of *them*?”

Plavis frowned.

“They’re true. The Flaurens, Georvans, and Alamari are marching north to attack Avannar. They found out what the Loremasters were doing, and they’ve declared war. The Flaurens captured Cheston, and now they’re about to attack the Loreguard who are fortified up east of Rallan on their way north. The Arcans you’ve heard about are actually part of the allied armies led by the Flaurens. The Masked have their own army down there helping the Flaurens, and it’s them that’s been freeing the Arcans from farms and arming them to fight against the Loreguard.”

That made quite a few of the men grumble and talk among themselves.

“The Flaurens and their allies are going to destroy the Loremasters for breaking the alliance,” Kyven summarized. “The Flaurens are marching north, and I’ve found out that the northern kingdoms are marching south. Avannar is going to be wiped off the face of Noraam,” he declared calmly. “The Loremasters broke the alliance and tried to take over all of Noraam, but they were found out before they could execute their plan. Now the twelve kingdoms are coming after them, and they won’t stop until Avannar is a smoking ruin.”

“How’d you find all this out, Kyven?” the mayor asked.

Kyven sighed. “Because I’ve been in the middle of it since I moved to Avannar,” he replied. “I’m also part of the Masked, Your Honor. They sent me to Avannar to help find out what was going on, using my cutting skills as a front to shelter the spies inside my shop. That’s why I took no apprentices, which I’m sure most of you thought was very strange, I didn’t want any of my boys mixed up in something so dangerous. I’ve seen all the documents with my own eyes, Your Honor. The Loremasters betrayed all of Noraam, and now every one of the twelve kingdoms are coming to destroy them for it. Every single kingdom declared war on them, gentlemen, from Menn to Alamar. And I hate to say it, but most of the war will be fought right here in the Free Territories. The Loreguard control the territories, and the kingdoms have to march through them to reach Avannar. The free Arcans hate the Loremasters even more than the kingdoms do, and they’ve thrown their lot in with the kingdoms. That’s why they’re going to attack

the Loreguard in the morning. The mining villages up and down the Smoke Mountains are the keystone of the Loremasters' overall strategy, so they're going to take them to keep them out of enemy hands."

"Free Arcans? What kind of shit story is that, Kyven?" Plavis asked.

"Like Master Virren said, all the Arcans that escaped over the years fled west, over the mountains, where there aren't very many humans," he replied. "They joined together and formed their own community using the skills they were taught while they were slaves. But with the Loremasters invading their territory, they had to respond. When the Loreguard marched over the mountains, they met the Arcans at the town of Deep River. I'm sure all of you heard about them marching out of Riyan a month or so ago?" he asked, and saw a couple of nods. "Half of them chased the Masked that had freed all the Arcans they gathered to be the slave labor for the expedition, the other half went on with their plan and went over the mountains. Their job was to build a city at the point where the Deep River and Great Snake river meet, so they could control both rivers," he explained. "That was the first step of the Loremasters' plan to take over Noraam. The alliance specifically prohibits the Loremasters from controlling any city or territory other than Avannar, and yet they were going to build a new city of their own over on the other side of the mountains."

"What use would that be?" the mayor asked. "Nobody lives out there."

"It makes perfect sense if you know what the Loremasters knew, Your Honor. See, the crystals are running out. Within two years, there won't be enough crystals to meet the demand. And ten years after that, there will be barely any crystals left."

There was a long, startled silence in the room. "But, but, that's impossible!" Lomax Deepdriller barked, one of the major mine operators in Atan.

"Is it? Why have the mines been playing out, Master Lomax? They've been playing out for a while now, and the whole village knew it. Why haven't you found new deposits yet? I know you've been looking. When

you do find deposits of shocked bedrock, there's either no crystals or so few that they're almost not worth the effort to mine them out. Well, that same scenario is playing up and down the Smoke Mountains. The southern edges of the chain have already seen their mines dry up, down in Georvan. The only place where there are deposits of any size left are right here in the Free Territories, and the Loremasters knew it. That's why taking and holding the mining villages in the territories is the most critical thing we need to do, to deny them from the Loremasters. Our little village and the others up and down the chain, like Darkhollow and Cumber, they're now the most important places in Noraam, because they're the only places left still producing crystals in any quantity.

“And now, look at the other side of it. Look at all the alchemical devices we have now. I think everyone in this room has at least two. Every one of them needs a crystal. Now multiply that by all the people that live in Noraam, from Menn to Alamar. We're even exporting alchemical devices to Eusica in exchange for their goods. That's millions of crystals we're using up every year. Those crystals don't just grow under the ground, gentlemen. Any miner worth his pick knows that. They're deposits, just like coal or iron ore. And we've used up almost all the deposits that are easy to get at. From here out, it's going to take a lot of effort and a lot of money to find crystals, and it'll just get harder and harder and harder, until there are none left.

“What this means to the Loremasters is that they were going to take over the mining villages to protect what crystals are left. That's why the Loreguard marched in here and took over the village, gentlemen. They weren't protecting you against wild Arcans, they were preparing to hold the village against the kingdoms when they finally realized what was going on and moved to capture the villages for themselves. Why do you think they're building all those fortifications? And why are the heaviest ones facing *east*, gentlemen? If they were just protecting you against wild Arcans, would they even *need* fortifications? And why are they defending the road leading back to Noraam? Arcans would attack from the forest to the west, using the trees as cover. Only a human army would march up here on the road.

“As far as the Loreguard invading Arcan territory goes, they were going to build that city out on the Great Snake River because they were going to try to build an alchemical machine that *makes* crystals, and keep it well out of Noraam proper where nobody could easily get at it. The Loreguard would see any armies marching west a long way off and be ready for them, and they’d control the river, preventing a naval power like Nurys or Flaur from coming up the river to attack their city. They’d build that machine, then use those crystals and their stranglehold on the mines to conquer the twelve kingdoms, starve the kingdoms of crystals until they couldn’t fight against the Loreguard anymore. And the kingdoms would be too busy putting down constant Arcan rebellions because there would be no more crystals for their collars to be able to put up much organized resistance,” he finished grimly. “The kingdoms would be in chaos, starving and at war from within, fighting each other over every crumb of bread, while the kingdom’s armies would be attacking anyone and everyone they thought had reserves of crystals. And all that would let the Loreguard just march in and take over.”

He let them talk a moment, absorbing that information, then he spoke again. “So, that’s why what’s going on is going on, gentlemen, and why there’s an army of Arcans camped on your western border. They’re going to attack in the morning and drive the Loreguard out. After that, they’ll occupy the village. They won’t interfere in the village’s daily routine any more than absolutely necessary, but I’ll tell you right now that they’ll free any slave Arcans they find in the village. If you want to stay, they’ll let you stay. If you want to leave, they’ll let you leave. But if you do leave, for the love of the Father, *do not* go to Avannar. Remember, the kingdoms are marching to destroy it. If you want to leave, either go north to Two Rivers or go south to Charlotte’s Town, they should be out of the path of the armies. Stay clear of Avannar and the territory around it.”

There were a few startled shouts when a billowing cloud of shadow manifested on the stage behind Kyven, then it converged into a gateway. Nightfall stepped out of it calmly, then she stopped and looked at all the men gaping at her. A few of the men had their hands down, reaching for

knives or pistols. “Calm down!” Kyven shouted, raising his hands. “She’s not an enemy.”

“She’s a *Shaman*!” someone screamed, and Kyven had to shout again to stop the impending riot and potential lynching.

“No, she’s not a Shaman,” Kyven called. “Nightfall, that was very bad timing,” he said darkly.

She gave him a slight smile. “I’m sorry, Kyven. We’ve completed our scouts.”

“Good enough. Go back to Toby, and the two of you kill every Loreguard officer you can find, but do it quietly. And I hate to say it, but Loremaster Gint has to be taken out as well. Capture him if you can, kill him if you must. That should keep them confused when the time comes.”

“Of course,” she nodded, then she stepped back into the shadow and vanished.

“Who are you, Kyven, to say a thing like that?” Torvik asked, giving him a look like the man had never seen him before.

“I’m a soldier now, old friend,” he answered grimly. “Loremaster Gint is a good and kind man, but at this moment, he is an enemy of us all. To protect both this village and the Arcans, he has to be neutralized. I’d rather not kill him, but I will if I have to.”

“Son, you’ve said a whole lot here, but I haven’t heard anything yet that’s going to make me side with you,” the mayor told him. “And now we see that you’ve brought a Shaman into this village.”

“She’s not the Shaman here, Your Honor,” Kyven said wearily. “The things the Loremasters have said about the Shaman are all lies. They’re not what they say they are.”

“How would you know?” Plavis sneered.

“Because *I* am the Shaman here, Master Plavis. Not her. Me.”

They all went dead silent, staring at him. No sane man would say a thing like that, so they had to believe it, if only for the sheer audacity of him saying it. For an irrational moment, with all those accusing stares, disbelieving stares leveled at him, he felt...ashamed. These weren't random strangers. He had grown up with these people, he had once been one of them. But that feeling of shame, of judgment, it faded quickly as his pride in who he was and what it meant roared into the forefront of his mind. He had chosen his path, and he would never be ashamed of that decision. He stood up straight, looking at them all with quiet dignity. "I am a Shaman," he declared in a strong voice. "Everything the Loremasters have said about the Shaman are all lies. I know, because I know them from the *inside*. They aren't evil. Truth be told, they care about us humans as much as they do about the Arcans, because the spirits we serve care about you," Kyven told him. "As far as we know, I'm the only human Shaman alive, and that puts me in a unique position to do things no other Shaman can do, because I'm not an Arcan. Come now, I'm sure you heard the rumors about me," he said, looking Plavis in the eyes. "That my shop was burned down and they put me in the Black Keep."

"That's why I was surprised to see you," Ingram chuckled.

"That happened," he admitted. "And the other rumors that I escaped?"

"Those weren't rumors," Ingram said. "I saw a wanted poster for you myself."

"And you heard the rumors of the black fox Shaman?"

"That *was* the black fox Shaman," the mayor called. "The one that attacked the Loremasters. They killed him. They came and said that the black fox was using your name."

"Actually, *I'm* the black fox Shaman. It was my disguise in Avannar so the Loremasters didn't know they were dealing with a human Shaman. My totem—nevermind," he said, seeing their startled expressions. "But that's the simple truth. I'm a human Shaman, and I'm doing what I can to protect the people of Noraam from a grave threat. I doubt any of you will believe

me, though. All you'll see is a *Shaman*, and give not one whit of thought to anything else," he said, looking around, and seeing quite a few hostile or malevolent stares, and the hottest of them all came from Master Torvik.

"As crazy as that sounds, I don't believe you, Kyven," the mayor said bluntly.

Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits, then he channeled lightning between his hands. The men gasped and jerked back when they saw the arcs of electricity dancing between Kyven's fingers. "No matter what you believe, Your Honor, this is the simple truth. I left the village not because I wanted to prospect or explore before taking over the shop, but because I'm a Shaman," he declared. "I've been able to see spirits since the day my mother died. My father told me to never tell anyone about it, that you'd think I was either insane or Touched, so I kept to myself, always stayed quiet, didn't dare get too friendly with anyone else I'd accidentally tell them about what I could see. I thought I was going mad before they found me, seeing strange things, seeing the spirits, seeing the shadow fox always sitting, always watching me. When Aven died from the Touch, it should have been me. The shadow fox lured me out of the path of that Touched Arcan, and it passed me by. I got drunk that night, and I told Virren about what I could see. Well, Virren is part of the Masked, he recognized what I was seeing, and he called a Shaman to come and see if I was crazy or if I was a Shaman. I left the village the next day, and out there in the real world, gentlemen, I learned the truth about who and what I am.

"I am a Shaman of the shadow fox," he declared, almost defiantly, sweeping his gaze through the room. "She is my totem spirit, and I follow her." He closed his eyes to the spirits and lowered his hands. "Now, is there anyone in this room that has anything to say about that?"

"Damn right I have something to say about that," Torvik snapped, jumping to his feet. "You've sold your soul to the demons!"

Torvik took a step back when Kyven laughed, almost ruefully. "If it were any other Shaman up here, I'd have told you how wrong you are,

Torvik,” he said with a slight smile. “The spirit I serve is not a very nice spirit, to say otherwise to be an insult to her, but I serve her because she needs me. That’s what we Shaman do, Master Torvik. We serve those who need us, no matter who they are, whether they love us or they hate us. The Arcans were in need, and so the Arcan Shaman came to be. Well, now the humans are in need, and here I am. I’m not entirely sure how I’m going to serve you quite yet, but that’s because I’m not very wise,” he admitted honestly. “I haven’t walked the path of the spirits long enough to have the wisdom to see where I fit into the design. But I serve the people of Noraam, Master Torvik. I serve you, I serve this village, I serve the Free Territories, I serve anywhere I am needed. That is the way of the Shaman, and it is a good way.”

Torvik glared at him, right along with Plavis and about half the council. Kyven sighed, not really expecting anything different, but still a bit stung by their rebuke. These were men who knew him, knew him better than most, and now they looked at him as if they had no idea who he was... and if everything they remembered about him was nothing but a lie. The only compassionate looks in the room were from Virren and Timble. “But we’re not here to discuss me being a Shaman,” he said evenly. “And I think we should break this up before the Loreguard get suspicious. So, everyone just go home, but try to spread the word as quietly for everyone to stay in their homes and stay under cover until it’s over. When the army gets here tomorrow, you’ll see for yourself that everything I’ve told you here tonight is true.”

They got up and filed out, most of them giving him evil looks, except for the mayor, who regarded him with new eyes. He may hate what Kyven had said, but what he said and how he said it made the mayor see that he was not the young man they all remembered. He was different now...and to Kyven, he was a better man. Kyven patted Virren on the shoulder, giving him a rueful look. “You shouldn’t have admitted it, Virren,” he said.

“My time here was more or less done anyway,” he shrugged. “When the army leaves here, I’ll go with them. I’ll leave my shop to my apprentices.”

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“You realize half of them will run straight for the Loreguard,” Timble noted.

“I know,” he replied evenly. “And when they get there, they’ll find quite a surprise waiting for them. It was the easy way to weed out the troublemakers.”

“You *planned* this?” Timble asked.

Kyven nodded. “Toby’s waiting for the council members who run for the Loreguard. He’s going to capture them. That way, we know which ones can’t be trusted.” He looked away a moment. “And he’s already made his first catch. Let me go help him, then I have some things to do. I’ll see you two later.”

“Be careful, Kyven.”

“I will,” he assured his friend, then he stalked out of the tavern and into the night.

After helping Toby round up the six council members that rushed for the Loreguard, Kyven left it to Toby and Nightfall to sort it out, since he had other appointments that night. He shadow walked back to Avannar, and again lurked within Greggson’s office, seeing that the man was alone, writing on a piece of parchment. Kyven stepped out of the shadows in the corner of his office, and Greggson immediately looked up, a pistol in his hand and half raised. “You,” he all but sneered.

“Who else would it be?” Kyven asked, sitting on the chair across from the desk and putting his feet on the edge of the Councillar’s desk. “DeVaur will probably attack tomorrow, he’s camped about five minars from the line your Loreguard have set just east of Durm,” he said lightly. “And I have your first assignment.”

“Really?” Greggson asked, his eyelid twitching.

“Oh come now, Greggson, don’t back out on me now. Remember, it’s your own neck you’re saving,” Kyven smiled, reaching into his belt and

taking a folded piece of paper. He flipped it onto the desk. “You need to order the Loreguard at Riyan to march immediately to Stinger Bay and reinforce the town. Instead of withdrawing them back to Avannar, I want you to move them out of the way. They should be safe enough at Stinger Bay.”

“And why am I doing this?” he asked.

“Because we’re going to need those men after Avannar is destroyed,” he answered evenly. “Both of us, I mean. I’m not out here to slaughter the entirety of humanity, Greggson. I want to save as many lives as I can while carrying out my plan. I also don’t want DeVaur to wander too far off course. If there’s a nice big garrison at Stinger Bay bristling with all those new guns you’ve managed to get in, then he’ll think twice about little detours and stay on the path. I don’t want him getting here and finding Avannar burned to the ground by the northern armies, which are on their way south. They’ve already allied themselves, which is why Mallan hasn’t attacked yet,” he told Greggson with a slight smile. “Once DeVaur gets here, the two sides will most likely form an alliance of convenience, then burn Avannar to the ground. That’s about when I’ll pull you out of here,” he told the man. “Just before the first probing attacks. I can’t risk you getting killed.”

“So I can still work for you?”

“I won’t have any need for you after that, but I made a deal,” Kyven said simply. “Shaman uphold their bargains. I promised you I’d keep you alive, and I’ll do just that. When it looks like things are going to get too hot around here, I’ll help you escape. Until then, you’ll help set things up so the Loreguard and the kingdoms beat each other senseless. That way, they won’t even think of trying to fight the Arcans. Everyone will just limp home, the Arcans will withdraw, and everyone will be happy. Well, maybe not happy. More like too beaten up to feel like carrying on,” he smiled lightly. “I found a nice plantation just north of Vickburrough, on the Great Snake River,” he told him. “It’s a sugar plantation. It’s fairly secluded, and it has potential to make some money if you manage it right. That’s your retirement package, Greggson, just as I promised.”

“What you want, it’s not going to work,” he grunted, looking at the paper. “You have no idea what kind of defenses we have here.”

“I’m fairly certain I can make good guesses,” Kyven replied evenly. “Lots of death machines, more alchemical weapons than I could possibly count, rabidly fanatical defenders who will fight to the death, and so on and so on and so on,” he said, twirling his finger in a circle beside himself. “You let me worry about that part of it, Greggson. I brought Cheston to its knees, I can deal with Avannar. After all, you can’t hide your defensive alchemy from me. I can see everything,” he said with a knowing little smile. “But what do you care? If I’m wrong, well, Avannar wins, you crush the armies of the twelve kingdoms, then you can just march out and take over without all those little games you were going to play up in the mountains. I guess you wouldn’t need me to help you escape if you’re so convinced that you’re going to win. So, the question is, why are you helping me now?” he asked pointedly, which made Greggson flinch.

“I grew up a farmhand, and I’ve come too far to risk everything and lose it all,” he replied, a bit lamely in Kyven’s opinion. The man was not a good liar under pressure. “If somehow the enemy does win, then I want to live, and I don’t want to be poor. I never want to be poor again.”

Well, he was honest about that much. “And you won’t be,” he said, pulling a crystal from under his doublet. “This should cover any costs you incur if you have to bribe people to carry out the orders.”

Greggson picked up the crystal and stared at it in a bit of surprise. “I’ve never seen—” he breathed, then snapped a gaze at Kyven. “It’s true. It’s really true.”

“That Shaman can make crystals? It is,” Kyven nodded. “Well, I can’t, but that’s me. Other Shaman can.” Kyven could almost see the wheels turning in the man’s mind. “I wouldn’t advise it.”

Greggson flushed a bit, looking at him. “Advise what?”

“Trying to capture a Shaman,” he said with a slight smile. “They can only make crystals if they still have their powers, and if they still have their powers, well, they’ll kill anyone and everyone around them. Remember, Greggyskins, as far as Shaman go, I’m *weak*. And you’ve seen what I can do,” he said, a bit grandly. “You don’t want to lock horns with a *strong* Shaman. If you survived the experience, you’d regret it.”

“I, I wasn’t thinking that.”

“Of course not,” Kyven murmured. “I’ll be on my way now, Councillar. Try to have those orders in place by tomorrow at sunset. I don’t want anything shiny distracting DeVaur as he marches north.”

“Where are you going?”

“To give DeVaur a detailed and completely accurate description of the defenses they have in front of him at Durm,” he smiled. “I want his nose bloody, but I *do* want him to keep coming. We’ll see how good DeVaur is when both generals know everything about the other. We’ll see who comes out on top. It should be quite an entertaining show.”

“You’re an evil monster!” Greggson spat, then he flushed.

“I’m not a monster, Greggson,” Kyven said with a chilling smile. “Evil? Well, that’s debatable, I guess. If it’s an evil thing to save the world from another cataclysm like the one that destroyed the great ancients, then I guess I’m evil.”

“Bullshit!” Greggson snapped.

“That’s what all this is about, Greggson,” Kyven said seriously as the shadows started to rise around him. “I’m trying to save the world, from *you*. You have no idea what you’re doing. That machine you want to build, that’s the very same machine that destroyed the great ancients. The Loremasters are trying to repeat that terrible mistake, and the spirits will not allow it, so they sent me. They don’t want to see the humans shatter their society a second time. Everything I’ve done since I came to Avannar has been to stop you from making that terrible mistake. You wouldn’t listen, you wouldn’t

be dissuaded, so now the Loremasters must be destroyed. When Avannar lies in rubble and you take your last look before I take you to Vickburrough, remember this, Councillar. You brought it upon yourselves. The Arcans will be freed, but that's just a bonus that arises out of the main objective, Greggson, and that's to save the world.

“Save it from *you*,” he breathed, his voice barely a whisper as the shadows enveloped him, and then melted away, leaving Greggson alone in his office.

And looking quite rattled.

The night was muggy and warm.

Kyven knelt on the top of an old tower, one of the ruins of Durm that didn't burn down, a stone tower that had once held a clock, the famous Durm Clock. It had been hundreds of years old and lovingly and carefully maintained by the citizens of Durm, but the fire that had raged through the city had destroyed the clock and killed the people that had once maintained it.

She was there, sitting beside him as he looked down over the enemy emplacements. He'd wandered the lines, carefully studying their defenses and troop placements, preparing his report for DeVaur. He had no doubt that DeVaur would have to resist having Kyven shot, but he wouldn't put his nose up at the intelligence that Kyven brought him. That was what Kyven did, and DeVaur knew it. He'd hold his nose and tolerate being in the presence of the human Shaman, the man who had humiliated him, if only to get that precious intelligence.

He wasn't kidding about being curious to see what DeVaur would do when both he and his adversary, Loreguard General Mark Beyonne of Nurys, had detailed intelligence on the numbers and disposition of the enemy. DeVaur was reputed to be one of the greatest military leaders in

Noraam, and Kyven guessed that tomorrow, he'd either prove it or he'd get his ass kicked.

She looked at him, her glowing green eyes unblinking and unwavering, and he put a hand down by her bushy tail. She moved it to touch him, and in that touch, there was communication. *A dangerous game you play*, she noted, a bit lightly.

"I learn quickly," he replied aloud. "I just wish I was there to see his face when he tries to play back that recorder."

Indeed, she sniffed. Greggson had had a recorder hidden in his office, but the drawback of them was that they only recorded sounds made by living things. They would record voices and animal sounds, the sound of clapping hands or a fly's buzzing wings, but not paper crumpling or boots on the floor or any other sound not directly made by a living thing. When Greggson played that recording back, all he would hear would be his own voice. Kyven had used an illusory voice, something that only Greggson could hear, working his mouth as if he were speaking the words but using an illusion to supply the voice. That illusion would not be recorded. *You have pleased me*.

"Enough to make you give me Danna?"

She gave him an amused look. *Nowhere near*, she chided him. *But you are making progress*.

He felt a little thrill at that, even through the hatred he felt for her. That she was pleased by his work told him he was doing well, and that meant that he was doing his job. He could tolerate her cruelty if it meant that good came about it for others. After all, it was no longer about him. It was about those who needed him. *You have other females to worry about*, she noted lightly.

"Nightfall," he grunted, to which she nodded.

She is infatuated with you. And she is quite correct. I will entrap you into siring a litter with her, she admitted with a toothy vulpine smile.

“Well, at least I’ll know what’s coming.”

It has done you little good in the past, nor will it in the future, my Shaman, she teased. *I will get what I want. Bow to that inevitability.* She shivered her head a little. *The armies are in order?*

“Yes, sister. As long as I don’t allow DeVaur to go chase butterflies, they should get there right about the time the northern armies march in. They’re staging in Phion now, the Hamm and Menn armies had a forced march to get there. Avannar will be wiped out between them. Then they start fighting each other, and Danna pulls the Arcans back to the mountains before they can turn on us. By the time they figure out what I did to them, it’ll be too late.”

Very good. Know that the spirits are well pleased with you, my Shaman, she told him, rather formally.

“I live to serve, sister,” he said eloquently.

And that pleases me.

She turned to look at him, then she dissolved away until only her eyes were left...and then those too vanished. Kyven sighed, looking down again. The spirits were pleased with him, but he wondered how pleased they would stay when the dying started.

Chapter 17

This was the kind of warfare the stories talked about.

Kyven sat on all fours in the ruined clock tower of Durm, watching as the artillery batteries prepared to start firing. It was still a bit too dark for them to see what they were shooting at, but they had to respond because the artillery from DeVaur's army had already begun to fire, and they were finding range. DeVaur's men had to have some kind of night sight alchemical devices for them to be firing in the steely darkness of predawn, when there was almost enough light to see, but not quite. Their batteries had been firing for over an hour now, concentrating their fire on the extreme western edge of the heavy fortifications, the ones abutting the ruins of Durm.

He'd discussed these kinds of tactics with Danvers several times before. Warfare conducted by the humans was a very messy and bloody business because of the weapons they used. Smoothbore, muzzle-loading muskets had a relatively short range and a slow reload time, so the best way to utilize them was the volley, getting as many troops in position as possible and firing all at once. Because of that, the military units would move in groups, rush up to a firing position, fire, then either advance or reload and allow another element to advance in their stead. These infantry units would be supported by artillery, trying to clear out the point of attack, even as the enemy artillery tried to break up the advances. At short range, alchemical weapons came into play. Every unit had a smattering of shockrods and firetubes, and Kyven could see that two of the critical Loreguard emplacements had repellers standing by and waiting for when the Flaurens finally got range. The Flaurens had bigger cannons, giving them more range, but the defending Loreguard had set up along a ridge east of the ruins and in the eastern ruins themselves, so they had the height advantage.

DeVaur's men would have to charge uphill to assault the fortifications, which were extensive.

The numbers slightly favored DeVaur, Danvers had told him. The combined Flauren and Georvan armies outnumbered the Loreguard six to one, but with the extensive and considerable fortifications the Loreguard had built along that ridge, it helped to equal things out. They had trenches so their men could fire without presenting a target to the enemy, a breastwork of logs and rails to block or slow down charges, and earthworks around critical positions to absorb artillery fire. Danvers said that an entrenched soldier was worth four attacking soldiers, so that gave DeVaur a roughly two to one advantage. However, since he would be assaulting from a heavily unfavorable position, the odds were actually only slightly better for DeVaur than for Beyonne. And both sides knew exactly how many soldiers the other had, as well as generally where they were. DeVaur had a map of the Loreguard defensive fortifications, and General Beyonne had a detailed report of the location and disposition of enemy units. DeVaur was using that map already, having chosen where to bombard with his artillery first, going after enemy artillery emplacements so his troops could advance without being blasted by cannons.

Kyven didn't really want to watch this, but he had to keep tabs on things here. This was an important event in that if the Loreguard repelled the attackers, then Avannar might be able to hold out against the northern armies. Avannar really was heavily defended, it was going to take Kyven going in there to disable many of their death machines to even things out, and could most likely repel an attack from the combined northern armies due mainly to the river and the fact that they'd be attacking the walled section of the city. Stone walls usually were nothing to a cannon, but those walls had been alchemically altered over the centuries to make them stronger than steel, to where cannonballs would just bounce off of them. Despite being capable of killing, watching the kind of mass slaughter that he knew was coming did not sit well with him, even more so because many of those deaths would be his fault. He was directly responsible for how this battle had shaped up, but he could live with the guilt. Every man who died

here was a man that either wouldn't be there to defend Avannar or a man that wouldn't be marching west to attack Haven once things went downhill. He was trying for maximum casualties without crippling the fighting ability of either side, so they could continue to fight each other. In the end, both sides would be their enemies, so they had to soften them up as much as possible while still dangling the carrot of victory in front of them to incite them to keep going.

This battle would take a day or two, Danvers had speculated. It was going to depend on if DeVaur could break the defenses and hold that breach long enough to get his army in there. He had the advantage in that the Loreguard was defending a line nearly twenty minars long, but the Loreguard had the advantage of being able to pull defenders from other parts of the line to break up DeVaur's penetrating advance. That was why DeVaur was going to attack the Loreguard at two points, one a diversionary attack and another, much more serious attack further east, at a point where Beyonne would not expect him to attack, a heavily wooded area where the ridge was high. The Georvans were skilled at woods fighting, and they'd be leading that attack, using the forest to get right on top of the defenders, then attacking them. The Flaurens were more adept at more conventional warfare, fought in the open using volley companies.

They'd have fun with that. The forest in Carin wasn't like the forests in Georvan and northern Flaur, which were predominantly pine and oak and had little undergrowth. Forests here in Carin and further north were thick jungles of old growth trees and heavy underbrush, most of it briars and blackberries. A man trying to march through a briar patch wouldn't have much of a uniform left when he reached the other side. The Georvans would need to find game trails through the brush to get to the top of the ridge, else they'd be bloody messes by the time they got up there. If their scouts could find them trails up the ridge and they could get a sizable force up there with a minimum of noise, they had a good chance of surprising the Loreguard and taking the ridge. From that foothold, they could attack the flank of the army, behind the fortifications, and that would let them pincer the

Loreguard between their eastern breach and their western assault, break them, and force them to either retreat or surrender.

For the defenders, their only real goal was repelling DeVaur, pushing him back. DeVaur couldn't just march around them, else they'd attack the back of the army as it marched north, and that would decimate DeVaur's army. An army on the move was in no way ready for combat, and besides, DeVaur had supply lines running back to Georvan that he had to protect. The Loreguard could cut off his supply lines if he didn't rout them here, for it would put a sizable force between him and the source of his supplies. It might even spur the Loreguard into invading northern Georvan to make the Georvans pull back to protect their territory.

As the light increased, the cannons started to fire. They were loud and smoky, quickly putting a pall of bluish smoke in the air over them. More and more cannons also started to fire, other embankments, and that meant that the battle was now fully engaged. Kyven watched impassively for nearly an hour as cannons traded volleys without any troops moving, as the steely dawn gave way to a cloudless, muggy sunrise. Kyven watched cannonballs bounce off the repeller shields of the bunker not far from him, them using two of them in tandem, one being active as the other had its crystals replaced; repellers burned through crystals like mad. Those repellers protected the cannon emplacement from being destroyed by the bigger cannons of the Flaurens, but didn't do much for the soldiers. More cannons were firing, and those were firing at trajectory, trying to land cannonballs into the trenches behind the palisade. The Loreguard were trying to do the same thing, firing at a high arc from the ridge at where they thought the Flaurens were positioned, which was inside the treeline about half a minar from the base of the ridge, not far inside the forest that survived the inferno that destroyed Durm and burned out the forest around it, creating the grassy plain through which the ridge crossed that went fifteen minars east and west, but didn't burn very far down the ridge due to the way the wind was blowing when Durm burned down. The fire had spread along the ridgeline, and then rain had put it out before it created a huge grassland like the one northwest of Deep River. DeVaur would have to

cross that field in plain sight of the Loreguard, and that would be the shit assignment for the Flauren troops.

Kyven spotted Beyonne himself about an hour after sunrise, riding the back of the fortifications out of sight of the Flaurens, and outside of cannon range. He had about ten officers with him. Kyven pondered jumping down there and killing him, at least until Beyonne looked right at him, his eyes almost intentionally drawn to the Arcan sitting on top of the burned-out clock tower. Quickly, word spread through the Loreguard army, and close enough for him to hear them shouting those most feared of words among the Loreguard, “Shaman!” “It’s the black fox!” someone in the artillery emplacement shouted in both fear and fury, pointing up at him.

Well, damn it, he didn’t want to be spotted quite so quickly. Now DeVaur would find out he was around, and if he didn’t put a hand in, DeVaur would be very suspicious. After all, he *was* supposed to be aiding the Flaurens. He rose up on his legs and reared back a hand, then thrust it forward even as he channeled lighting down into the artillery bunker. His target was the kegs of gunpowder they had stored behind an earthen wall that separated the cannons from the ammunition, there to prevent a hit on a cannon from taking out their powder stores. His lightning flash-ignited the powder, and he flinched and then dove to the ledge of the tower when a raging fireball bloomed from where he struck, all but vaporizing about ten men and sending fiery shrapnel flying hundreds of rods in every direction. The clock tower shuddered, then he heard a terrible groaning sound from deep within it. The concussion had damaged the tower! The whole thing started to shift, then it leaned ominously. Kyven abandoned his perch, literally diving off and into a converged gateway, rolling over his shoulders in the shadow world, then he looked back into the real world and saw the clock tower teeter, then crash into the ruins of Durm away from the army. He bounded just a single four-legged lurch and converged a gateway back into the real world just before and under him, but instead of dropping through it, he instead reached through it, feeling the cold tingles all over his arm as it reached through the gate.

He knew how it looked to those men. A black disc appeared over them, then a clawed hand-like paw reached out of the darkness, hooked into the back of General Mark Beyonne's uniform, and hauled him up out of his saddle and into the dark nothingness, which then disappeared and left not a trace of the man or the arm that had reached out of it. The man cried out in Nurysian, that Cajar language as Kyven dragged him two steps and converged another gateway, then threw him through it. Again, he knew how it would look to those outside. The black disc would appear, then a Loreguard officer would tumble out of it, literally right at the feet of Field Marshall DeVaur's horse. Beyonne vomited noisily as Kyven stepped out of the gateway himself, the man on his hands and knees and trying to recover from being exposed to the shadow world, something DeVaur knew only too well. "Field Marshall, meet General Beyonne of the Loreguard. I'm sure you two will have a nice long chat. Now if you'll excuse me, I'll create a diversion so you can attack," he said, then he backed into his gateway and let it dissipate.

Without Beyonne, DeVaur was sure to win, but the Loreguard would still slow him down considerably. Beyonne was certain to have competent officers that knew the battle plan and could carry it out without him; the one thing he couldn't fault the Loreguard was over the quality of its officers. They were well trained, and while they'd never seen anything like Kyven before, they *did* show that they learned from experience. It was something of a standing order everywhere in the Loreguard that men of importance were never alone, *just in case* Kyven happened to be around and tried to kill them and take their places. Kyven had burned the Loreguard using that trick enough times for them to take it into account, and they knew he had a magical means of transportation that allowed him to move great distances in a very short time. That they knew from Greggson himself, since he'd been seen in Cheston and Deep River while also showing up in the capitols of all the northern kingdoms and Avannar, something that was impossible by normal means. They knew he could traverse the entire continent in a day.

Kyven did continue to assist, and that was by doing what he was best at, spreading confusion and terror through the Loreguard army. They knew

he was there now, and the officers had an idea of what he could do. He did, however, have to do it all out in the real world, since he may need the shadow world for a quick escape, and he didn't want to make it easy for the *things* in there. He had to at least look like he was helping, else DeVaur might get suspicious, but he didn't want to help *so* much that it made it easy for him. Kyven took the illusion of an artillery officer and stumbled out of the ruins of the emplacement he had attacked, pretending to be struck deaf by the explosion. He stumbled into the trenches acting dazed and confused, blinking owlishly at the men that looked at him, looking for all the world like an injured and shell-shocked man, blood seeping out of his ears and a gash and burn on his cheek. One man put down his rifle and moved to help him, but the man screeched in agony and collapsed. The other man gasped and whirled their rifles when they saw the black fox there, blood dripping off his claws from where he'd ripped the throat out of the man that had advanced to help him, but they died where they stood, flash-frozen by a channeled blast of pure cold. Kyven laid down in the trench and took the illusion of just another murdered soldier, a quartet of claw rakes on his face taking out one of his eyes just to make it extra-gruesome, then attached himself to the illusion so he could move around without the illusion of the corpse moving, so long as he stayed in touch with it. He wanted to be safely in a trench for this.

His next bit of handiwork made him quite proud of himself. It took him nearly five minutes to work out how he wanted it to look, dredging his memory of his childhood stories and what little religious education he'd received under his father and Holm, then he looked over the construction in his mind's eye and felt it was good enough. He took on a look of intense concentration as he opened himself to the shadow fox, let her see his planned illusion and grant him the power to cast the spell, which she did so with particular relish. What he was about to do was the epitome of guile and deceit, and she approved of it heartily. This was one of the most complicated illusions he'd ever attempted in both the scope of it and the number of components it possessed, and he knew he had to throw himself utterly into it. Just like with the gates of Fort Summer in Cheston, they had

to *believe* what they saw, else this would just burn up his energy for no reason.

He felt it under his feet when it began, and that told him that he'd made it believable enough for it to affect the very earth itself. The ground began to tremble, then shake, then there was a huge eruption of flame at the base of the ridge, gouting hundreds of rods into the air, sending bits of flaming earth flying in all directions. What rose out of that pit was almost indescribably hideous, a muzzle-faced *thing* with flames for eyes that clawed its way out of the earth, huge fangs that dripped green ichor, black, cracked skin with glowing red in the fissures, the skin looking as if it had been charred by the heat within. The thing tore itself free of the earth, standing up somewhat erect, its head *over* the top of the ridge, then he arched its back to raise its head to the sky, and it shrieked out a cry that made just about every man who heard it have the hair stand up on the back of his neck.

It was a creature right out of the Book of the Trinity. It was one of the Fallen Ones, a demon, which supposedly were the creatures that the Shaman had bargained to gain their power, according to Loremaster propaganda. But hell, if they were going to believe that idiocy, he may as well use it against them. The Loreguard shivered behind their fortifications, gaping at the smoldering monstrosity, feeling the heat it emanated tightening their faces and scorching the grass around the flaming crater under and between the creature's feet.. Kyven had thrown everything into the illusion, all but breathing life into it, because it had to affect the real world for anyone to believe it. He had it walk down the ridgeline about twenty steps, each step covering ten rods, getting right about where DeVaur was planning to assault the main line of the Loreguard in his diversionary attack. It then turned to face the ridge, and it shrieked out that blood-curdling roar just before it hunched over and slammed its long clawed hand into the wooden breastwork arrayed in front of the trenches.

This was the telling moment, and the illusion proved to pass muster. The illusory hand slammed into the split logs and rails, and burning wood tumbled down the hill as the illusion raked its claws over the breastwork,

tearing a hole in it, even as the mere sight and the heat of the illusion made the men in the trenches climb out on the far side and flee mindlessly, screaming in terror. The forty rod tall illusion stepped up the ridge and kicked the breastwork away from the hole, widening it, then crossed the trench even as cannons were turning to fire on it. But what surprised Kyven was when four men brought up a cone-looking device made of brass and iron, clearly an alchemical weapon of some kind, but too far away for him to see clearly. The only reason he was maintaining the illusion at that distance was because it was so big that he could still see it clearly through spirit sight, having to partially look through the ground under the trenchline. The four men working that device aimed it at the illusion at the orders of a mounted officer, then the man pointed his saber at it. Kyven gasped, then he cursed when a black eruption of concentrated darkness exploded out of the end of the cone. It was a black crystal weapon! The black ray struck the illusion and passed right through it, because Kyven was too startled that they *had* a black crystal weapon that he didn't have the illusion react to it in any way...and since it wasn't real, the black energy just passed through it harmlessly. The ray struck the tops of the trees on the other side of the field, and those trees immediately had their leaves turn black and crumble into dust, and the trees themselves fell into the field edge, killed instantly by the weapon. He had the illusion turn on that weapon immediately, raising its clawed hand to smash the weapon and kill its crew, a crew who gaped up at the illusion in shock. But, unfortunately, that officer there was much sharper than most humans. "It's just an illusion! It's the black fox playing tricks!" he shouted, twirling his saber. "Don't believe it! It's a fake!"

And that was enough to doom the illusion. No matter how much substance he put into the illusion, if enough people looking at it didn't believe it was real, their reality smothered the reality Kyven was trying to imbue into his creation. The men around the illusion flinched when the heat they felt it emanating just *stopped*, though the flames licking at the logs the illusion tore out of the breastwork still licked hungrily at the split rails. Kyven had the illusion look down at the officer, a hideous smile on its fanged maw. "Well played, human," he had it say, even as he converged a gateway into the shadow world. "But unfortunately for you, you just

showed me who I have to kill next,” the illusion uttered, then it wavered and vanished.

The man barely had time to turn his horse before a swirling disc of pure darkness manifested right over his horse, and the men around gaped in horror when they saw the officer grabbed by his saber-wielding arm and yanked up into the disc, which then vanished like it had never been. Another swirling disc of shadows appeared *under* the black crystal weapon, and it suddenly dropped into it, gravity pulling it down, along with the four men who were manning it, their screams cut unnaturally short as they fell into the darkness.

Within the shadow world, Kyven basically had the four men and the weapon fall right in and right back out, another gateway manifesting about two minars away...and about two hundred rods above the trees. The alchemical weapon and the four men plummeted down into the canopy, the men killed by impact with the branches and the black crystal weapon bashed into pieces by the time it hit the ground. The officer in his grasp, who was swaying unsteadily, he decided to keep alive. He again stepped out of the shadows in front of DeVaur, and he threw the man to the ground. “This one’s too smart to kill,” he told the assorted officers and men guarding them.

“You did that, that *thing*?” DeVaur asked in surprise.

Kyven nodded. “It was just an illusion. This clever one here figured that out, so I had to get him out of there before he ruined my other little surprises,” he chuckled. “I take it that it was fairly impressive?”

“*Mei Diau*, I almost wet myself when I saw that thing rise up out of the ground,” one of DeVaur’s generals said with a chuckle, which earned him a short glare from the Field Marshall, who had in fact done just that when faced with the kind of fear Kyven’s tricks could inspire.

“Give me another ten minutes or so to completely disrupt the trenches right there where I tore out the breastwork, then make your attack,” Kyven told them as he turned and thrust his open palm out behind him, causing a

swirling disc of shadow to manifest. “And if I see another black crystal weapon, I’ll destroy it immediately.”

“We need those cannons taken out!” DeVaur called.

“It’s either the men or the cannons, take your pick,” Kyven told him. “I’ll be too tired to do both.”

“The cannons,” he replied immediately. “My men can take the ridge if they can get close enough without being broken up by those cannons.”

“Then it’s the cannons,” Kyven said confidently. “Give me ten minutes, and don’t expect any more help. I’ll be exhausted by then.”

“Good luck, Shaman,” one of DeVaur’s officers called.

“I don’t need luck,” Kyven said with a toothy smile as he stepped back into the shadow world.

It took Kyven about ten minutes and a lot of moving around to attack two of the three cannon emplacements that had range to attack where DeVaur was going to assault. Each time, Kyven struck from ambush, not using his cold attack because it was too tiring, but instead appearing within range of the gunpowder they used and channeling lightning against it, then vanishing before any of the Loreguard could draw a bead on him with their muskets, where they lost him in the explosion of the gunpowder. Kyven felt the *things* in the shadow world quickly homing in on him as he had already walked several times, and walked several times more as well as lurked within the shadow world to figure out where best to appear to attack the cannons, until he knew they had found him and he couldn’t risk another journey even as he stepped out to attack the last cannon emplacement a short distance away, back among the trees where they couldn’t see him come out of the shadow world...and saw that they were ready for him. They had nearly fifty men around the emplacement, guessing correctly that it was next on his list. Kyven wasn’t a fool, however. Unable to escape back into the shadow world, he wasn’t about to risk himself against that many Loreguard, not with him being as tired as he was and them expecting him.

He retreated deeper into the trees, which put him nearly three hundred rods from the cannons, then he blew out his breath, centering himself. He took on the illusion of a rabbit, dropped down to all fours, then used the small illusion as cover to make his escape, fleeing the battlefield. He was no longer any use to DeVaur, and he didn't want to do *too* much. Kyven could actually tell the truth if he was challenged over not destroying those cannons, that he was too tired and they were too heavily defended.

He ran deeper into the old growth forest after getting out of where the forest had burned, nearly an hour into thick forest, then he finally stopped and called Danvers. "DeVaur wants to know where the hell you are," Danvers chuckled after picking up the talker.

"About an hour from the fighting," he replied. "I ran into too much resistance, I couldn't do anything else. I escaped."

"Well, you did enough. From what I'm being told, DeVaur is certain he can take the fortifications now," Danvers told him. "You punched a big damn hole in their defenses, and they're scrambling to repair it while under heavy cannon bombardment."

"Good. I'm stuck here for a while, Wilson. Tell Nightfall that she can't shadow walk until I call back and say it's safe, it's *way* too dangerous to shadow walk right now."

"I'll pass it along," he replied. "We'll probably be moving by the time you get back to us. We've split up the army and we're all marching out now."

"Alright, I'll look for you on the way to Riyan."

"That's where we'll be," he affirmed.

Kyven gave the fur back to Danna after he put the talker away and continued on foot, running effortlessly along old game trails wearing a pair of leather moccasins that one of the infantry men made for him, which he could roll up and put in a pocket. They were just thick enough to protect his feet from anything sharp on the forest floor, but thin enough to let him feel

the contour of things under his feet. He was just getting more distance between him and the fighting behind him. It was going to take DeVaur a few days to defeat the Loreguard, rest his troops, then start north again, and hopefully the Loreguard would give him a bloody nose. He was confident they would. Even without Beyonne to command them and Kyven breaking a hole in their breastwork fortifications, it would still cost DeVaur a lot of men to storm that ridge, which he *would* do now that Kyven had made a hole for him.

So, his work at Durm was done.

He stopped in a small clearing that had a brook running through it and got some water, then he sat on the grass by the bank and rested a moment. He leaned back on his hands and just enjoyed the sunshine, at least until the presence of a spirit incited his spirit sight. He felt his eyes shift of their own volition, and a huge white animal with a glowing blue nimbus around it appeared before him. It was a massive canine of some sort, looking somewhat like a wolf, but with a slightly broader snout and nearly half again as large. Not nearly as large as a Lupan, but somewhere in between. It sat on its haunches before him patiently, its tail wagging. It was a male spirit, Kyven sensed, and he nodded to it. "Brother white wolf," he said respectfully. "Are you seeking me?"

It reached a paw out and put it on his shin, and in that touch, there was communication. *I seek you*, the wolf affirmed. *I would ask a boon of you*.

Kyven looked at him. "I am a totem Shaman, brother," he replied. "I would be happy to help you, brother white wolf, but sister shadow fox must approve. She is my totem. I am *her* Shaman. I will summon her for you so you might discuss the matter, if you so wish it."

He felt her materialize right behind him, then rear up and put her paws on his shoulders, looking down over his head. *I approve*, she declared. *Brother wolf has need of you, Shaman. You will help him to the best of your ability*.

“As you wish, sister,” he said obediently, throttling his usual emotions because there was another spirit present. How he felt towards his totem was their private business. In the public eye, he must appear as nothing but a dutiful and obedient Shaman to his totem. “What do you need of me, brother wolf?”

You are the only mortal capable of distant travel, he began. I need you to fetch a human from Eusica and bring her here.

“I would be happy to do so, but it’s very dangerous for me to shadow walk at the moment,” he said, a bit apologetically. “Can it wait until perhaps this evening? It should be safe by then.”

That is perfectly fine, he nodded. I will return at sunset.

“I’ll wait right here for you,” Kyven replied. The wolf nodded, took his paw off his shin, then turned and walked calmly into the forest, where he vanished. Kyven looked up over his head and could barely see the shadow fox’s nose. “What does he need me to do?”

As he said. There is a human in Eusica we need here. You will bring her.

“That sounds easy enough,” Kyven said.

You remembered your place. That pleases me, she told him, a bit impishly. You are mine, Shaman. To hear you admit it pleases me far more than I care to admit.

“You make sure to make it abundantly clear all the time.”

That’s because you’re too strong-willed and defiant. Admirable qualities, when sufficiently managed, she told him, licking the top of his head playfully. Your actions in Durm also pleased me. That was quite clever.

“How long will it take DeVaur to break through?”

Most likely half a day. The western Loreguard positions are not expecting the Georvans to attack from the forest. They will take them completely by surprise. They labor to repair the damage you did to their wooden breastwork, but DeVaur's weapons of war are only widening it. Soon he will attack, and not just to divert attention. You have given him a hole, and he intends to march right through it. He has grudgingly admitted to Danvers that you are very useful, she informed him with a slightly smug tilt to her thoughts

"I'm...glad I'm not there. I have no real desire to watch so many die," he said with a sigh.

It is against our nature. To kill is the last resort, only when guile and deceit fails, she told him sagely. But when it is necessary, it must be done. And this is necessary.

"I don't have to like it."

And it is good that you do not, she agreed. Your use of the shadow world was quite clever, Shaman. It pleases me that you expand your knowledge every day.

"Well, it just seemed like an easy way to go about it," he said with a rueful chuckle. "I still have much to learn."

True, but your progress has been exceptional. You are truly my Shaman to adapt so quickly to what is alien to you. It proves the bond between us. I would remind you to pass your knowledge to the others. Even Nightfall could do with daily lessons, and to better arm Toby and Danna for their first steps into the shadow world is only wise.

"I know, I've been doing just that," he nodded. "Mainly with Nightfall, because she's in the most danger."

Focus on Danna. She is close, Shaman. She will walk very soon.

"I will."

She left him after that, and he settled in at the clearing. He hunted down a deer and rested while he ate, got his strength back, then he practiced with his shadow powers. He was getting very good at manifesting solid shadows, though it was still quite difficult. It took a *lot* of concentration. He practiced more with his shadow form, understanding that in a pinch, it could be a powerful defensive ability, allowing him to shift and change and stretch his body to avoid a sword, flatten out of musket fire, evade shockrod blasts, even reach impossibly high and pull himself into the trees. He even combined his shadow form with solid shadows, evading imaginary attacks while using solid arcs of shadow like a shield, presenting them to those same imaginary attacks. He learned how to move with the shields, almost like a fluid dance, understanding that it was best to *deflect* rather than *stop*, let the attacks hit the shields of shadow at an angle and deflect away harmlessly, that it would take much more of his energy and concentration to prevent the shield fully to the attack and try to stop it. He had to make it as efficient as possible, since manifesting solid shadows was both hard to do and took a lot out of him.

At sunset, the white wolf returned. He was actually a very handsome and noble-looking spirit, Kyven decided, his head at Kyven's chest, his fur white as fallen snow, his eyes glowing with a soft blue radiance. Kyven knelt down and proffered his hand, which the spirit accepted by sitting and putting his paw within it. *We go a great distance, Shaman, and sister shadow fox warned me that the further one travels within the shadows, the more dangerous it becomes. Are you comfortable with this?*

"My spirit told me to go, so I will go," he said simply. "The danger is irrelevant. I obey sister shadow fox," he said simply.

Such loyalty is becoming to the wolf, he said with simple elegance, nodding once. *I will go where you must be. Can you find me there?*

Kyven nodded. "I know you now, brother. I can find you as long as I can see you."

Then abide here until the sun fully sets, then come seek me, he ordered.

“I will do as you say,” he replied, sitting down and crossing his legs.

Kyven only had to wait about ten minutes until the sun fully set, as the sky darkened in the west, then he stood up, blew out his breath, and prepared himself. He’d never tried to walk so far before, and the wolf was right. The further he went, the more dangerous it was. But if he could walk safely between Cheston and Haven, he could walk between Noraam and Eusica. It couldn’t be much further.

He converged a gateway into the shadow world and stepped through, then immediately started casting about for the wolf spirit. He could indeed sense it, a great distance off to his left, so he turned and bent the shadow world to his will so that every step would carry him a vast distance. And as soon as he took the first step, the *things* knew where he was. They could feel the tremendous alteration he was enforcing into their world, and it drew them to him far faster than usual, even when he walked to Haven. Then again, he’d never tried to travel so great a distance in so few steps before. By six steps, he realized that the *things* were going to reach him *before* he reached the wolf, so he all but broke out into a run, trying to cover the remaining distance immediately. His attempt worked, but it also succeeded in bringing the *things* right to him.

He could see them when he reached where the wolf was, saw them reaching out for him with those stretching tendrils, those deadly tentacles whose touch was death, and he realized in that split second that he had no time to open a gateway back into the real world. He moved instinctively to defend himself, sought to turn aside those shadowy tentacles with a shield of solid shadow—

Shadow! *Shadow!*

He’d never even *considered* it before, but it was truth! The *things* didn’t just *live* in the shadow world, they *were made of shadow!*

His eyes narrowing, he thrust his open palm out, fingers spread, and exacted every iota of concentration against his attackers. The closest of them shuddered, and then its reaching tentacles *stopped*, the closest of

which barely an arm's reach away from his hand. He held out his other hand as more tentacles lanced in at him, taking a half-step back and setting his feet almost as if he were pushing, because in a way, he *was*. He was exerting physical force against his attackers, attacking their bodies themselves, controlling the shadow. They struggled against him, sought to break free of his control, their tentacles shivering and trembling as they sought to just stretch just a tiny bit more, close enough to touch him....

But they could not. Kyven pushed his hands forward, and the tentacles retreated. The *things* started to howl in fury, a sound that made Kyven's skin crawl, but he maintained his absolute concentration not on the shadow world, but on the *things* themselves, using his power to control shadow against them.

"Back," he said softly, feeling them struggle against him. He stood fully erect and spread his arms, holding them in place while he converged a gateway behind him using his other hand. "I'm sorry," he said mildly, "but I'm not going to be your dinner today...or any other day," he added, understanding what this meant. If he could control *them*, then he could hold them at bay until he left the shadow world. And they weren't as mindless as they sometimes appeared, which was in its own way a deceptive danger concerning the *things*. He could feel others of them hanging back, watching, *learning*. They saw that he could control them directly, and they weren't coming close enough to let him do it. Like a hunter, they were studying their intended prey, learning his tricks, planning the day when they could outsmart him and catch him. It was almost easy to think them mindless in how they acted, but the reality was that they were actually rather cunning.

Almost intelligent.

He held his concentration on them as he backed into his gateway even as he willed it to pass around him, then he found himself standing in a small clearing of an old forest, the trees huge hardwoods with no brush between them, their canopies towering high over him, and there was a thin mist among the trees that made it hard to see more than fifty rods out if he were using his human eyes. This was definitely not Noraam. The trees looked

familiar, like oaks, but they were far too large to be oaks. They had to be Eusican trees, which were fabled to reach halfway to heaven in some of the oldest forests, true giants. The white wolf sat sedately near him, watching as Kyven gestured at the gateway and allowed it to dissipate. Kyven blew out his breath and let himself relax a bit, then he looked at the wolf and chuckled. "That was exciting," he declared.

"We have only a short ways to go," the wolf said audibly, though its mouth didn't move. *"The human female we seek lives just over that ridge,"* he added, motioning with his muzzle.

"Lead on, brother."

They traveled for about ten minutes, and came up over the ridge and found a small village nestled in the shallow valley on the far side. It had a small brook flowing right through the center of it, no doubt where the villagers drew their water, ten different small bridges crossing over the brook at regular intervals. The houses were small and made of mud-sealed timbers and roofed with thatch, a humble place, but the houses all had small, neatly tended gardens behind or beside them, each garden protected by a fence. Kyven's spirit sight couldn't look through the walls of the houses, the walls covered with moss growing on the sides of the timbers or in the mud chinking. Every single house was totally covered on the outside with moss, all the way up into the thatching. That living barrier hid the interior of the houses from his Shaman eyes.

And that was something he filed away for future reference. It seemed to be *very* useful when dealing with Shaman...or with spirits.

"Come, the house we seek is on the other side of the village," the spirit intoned, padding past him and down the hill.

The village was quiet. It almost seemed deserted. Kyven noticed that there were no dogs around the houses or in the village, and that every door was quite heavy and looked very sturdy. These people, they were afraid of something. He said as much to the spirit, who nodded as he walked beside

him. “*Noraam is not the only place where there are monsters,*” he said simply. “*But for now, we are safe. They are elsewhere this night.*”

The wolf led him to the house furthest from the center of the village, a small yet very sturdy little cottage with its walls covered in moss, making it impossible to see inside. Though the door was made of wood and was uncovered, he couldn’t even see through *that*, for there was something alive about the wood that blocked his vision. That, or the wood that made up the door was still alive, either or. He regarded the door for a moment, then he stepped up and rapped on it. He heard startled shouts from within, but he simply knocked again, then called out. “I’m not a monster,” he called.

The door opened quickly, and a large, very burly man with dark skin and curly jet black hair stared at him in shock. The man was bare from the waist up, and he wore only a very brief pair of knicker-like pants that only reached his upper thighs, thighs which were as round as oak trees. He grabbed Kyven roughly by the shoulder and yanked him in, then bolted the door from the inside, throwing a heavy crossbar over it. He chattered at Kyven in what sounded like Cajar, the same flowing style of language. “I don’t speak Cajar, I’m sorry,” he said apologetically.

“It’s alright,” came a soft voice from the next room. The voice was feminine, demure, and two women stepped out. The taller of them was obviously the mother of the shorter, a dark-skinned woman with thick, curly black hair and very handsome features. But as the shorter one stepped out from behind her, Kyven could only stare in shock. She was about fifteen, young, but very well endowed with adult curves. Her face was dark like her father’s, handsome like her mother’s, but her eyes were sky blue, and her hair was a shimmering, pure white, like snow. Just looking at her shivered his soul, and he knew why the white wolf had sent him as he looked at her.

She was a Shaman. The *second* human Shaman.

“I speak some Noraavi,” the woman said. “What do you do out and about during the night, Noraavi?”

He kept his eyes locked on the shy girl, who seemed to be as awestruck staring at him as he was at her. The two adults took notice of their strange stare, then the husband picked up a stout cane from near the door and took a step back. “What are you doing out, stranger?” the woman asked again, more firmly.

Kyven blinked. “I’m sorry. I was sent here,” he replied, glancing at the girl.

“You dared walking the forest at night?”

“I’m not afraid of the monsters,” he shrugged. “May I come in?”

“When you explain why you are here,” she said firmly after speaking to her husband, who was glowering at Kyven and holding his cane like a weapon.

Kyven slowly withdrew his shockrod and removed his posts knives, showing them to the man, and he stepped up and set them on the small table next to the door. “I’m not here to fight, I’m here to talk,” he declared, pointing at the girl. “I’d say I’m here to talk about your daughter.”

“What do you know of her?” the woman asked before translating, which was making the husband uneasy.

“I know that she’s much more than she appears to be,” he replied evenly. “And I know she hides a secret.”

The woman frowned, said something to the man, who then barked in that musical language of theirs and brandished his cane. “You are not welcome here,” the woman said in a commanding tone.

“I know about her because she is one of us,” Kyven said, opening his eyes to the spirits. The two adults gasped and stepped back, but his spirit sight incited the same in the girl, and her eyes took on an azure glow, which was exactly like the wolf’s.

White hair...blue eyes. Was she a totem Shaman? Had the wolf claimed her? Kyven’s hair was black, like his totem’s fur, and his eyes

glowed with the same green radiance as his totem spirit. Were those visible marks of a Shaman who was claimed by a totem?

“I’m not here as an enemy,” Kyven said in a soft voice, holding his hands out. “I’m here to talk about your daughter. Talk about what she is, and what it means.”

The husband and wife gave each other startled glances, the woman translated, then the man lowered his cane. “You are like her!” the mother said in surprise.

“She is a Shaman, honored mother,” Kyven told her simply. “As am I. I was sent here to talk to you about it. There are things that must be done.”

“Shaman? I have only heard myths of them. Stories. They are not real!” the woman declared.

“We are very real, honored mother,” Kyven said in the same calm voice, keeping his hands out. “Though there are very, very few of us, and we live on Noraam, not here in Eusica. Your daughter has come of age, and her powers are starting to manifest. That is why she shows her eyes to me. It means that it is time for her to start her walk,” he said, almost to himself. “I was sent here to bring her back, so that she might learn to control her powers, but I didn’t know she was so young. Clearly, honored mother, we must sit and talk this out. This is an unexpected complication.”

The man chattered at the woman, and she responded in a slightly nervous voice. The man gaped at him, then glared menacingly and said several words in a low, dangerous tone. “You will take our daughter nowhere,” the woman declared.

“You’re right, I’m not going to *take* her,” Kyven said. “We must sit and talk of this, honored mother. I think that this is the time for understanding and wisdom, not violence,” he said, looking at the burly father, who clearly looked like quite a handful in a fight. “I will explain why I am here and what needs to be done, and you will explain if any parts of it are unacceptable. We can then...bargain over those points where we disagree,

and come to an agreement that we can both live with.” He glanced at the man. “Perhaps I could return in the morning, when things aren’t so sudden or frightening? I can meet you anywhere within the village you wish.”

The two parents exchanged rapid, almost heated words over several minutes, as the girl continued to stare at him, her eyes open to the spirits, then she gasped and retreated behind her mother when the white wolf came through the door and sat sedately by Kyven’s side. She looked around her mother’s arm and stared fearfully at the wolf, but Kyven simply reached out and put his hand on the wolf’s head, his hand appearing to touch nothing to the parents. “It’s alright, young one, he won’t hurt you,” Kyven said in a gentle voice. She may not understand his words, but she’d understand his tone. “I get the feeling that he’s been watching over you for a long time, just as my totem did for me. Brother wolf, would you be so kind as to allow the others to see you? It might explain quite a bit.”

You are wise, Shaman, the wolf imparted with a little amusement. The parents gasped and recoiled when what Kyven was touching suddenly became visible to them, and it was clearly not a natural animal, not with it glowing with that soft blue aura. “This is brother wolf, honored mother. He has been watching over your daughter, protecting her, probably since the day she was born. He is...a guardian spirit of a sort. He means you no harm. In fact, he probably cares a great deal for you, since you are the girl’s parents.”

“*Daios mai!*” the man said in astonishment, staring at the spirit. That sounded strangely Flauren to Kyven.

The woman gave him a long, hard look, then she swallowed. “Come, we will sit and talk,” she declared.

They brought him into their house, and while the husband didn’t relinquish his cane, he did sit at a table within a low-beamed kitchen. The woman put on a kettle of water, then spoke to the girl, who then went back to a pantry. The wolf sat beside Kyven, still visible, which caused both of them to constantly glance at him. “Andra has spoken of the large white dog

that only she seems to be able to see,” the woman said. “Now I see that it was no fancy of her imagination.”

“No, the white wolf is very real,” Kyven nodded. “He is a spirit, honored mother.”

“Darda,” she said. “And my husband, Jallack.”

“Kyven Steelhammer, Shaman of the shadow fox,” he introduced, nodding to them, which the woman translated for the man.

“What exactly is a spirit?” she asked.

“They live in a world behind our own, a world attached to ours that we can’t see, but they can see into ours,” he replied. “The spirits are much like we are, Mistress Darda. They are sentient beings with unique personalities. Some are kind and gentle, and some are not. They are as varied as human kind. However, all of them are very wise, and they care about the mortals in our world. We Shaman serve the spirits by acting as a go-between, communicating the wishes of the spirits to the people and helping whenever and wherever we are needed.”

“The stories I’ve heard say that the Shaman are evil demon-worshippers who subvert the animal-people slaves of Noraam.”

“Arcans, Mistress Darda, they’re called Arcans. And as you can see, there aren’t *only* Arcan Shaman,” he added, patting his own chest. “At first, there were only Arcan Shaman because the Arcans needed them. Shaman exist where they are needed, Mistress Darda, our primary purpose is to serve. I’m the first of the human Shaman, but I’m certainly not the *only* one,” he said, looking at the girl as she came out of the pantry. She went around the far side of the table and went to the kettle, pouring what looked like tea into it. “The spirits have decided that the humans now need Shaman too, and, well, here I am. I’m the first of those to come. Your daughter is a Shaman, Mistress Darda. That’s why her eyes glow sometimes, it’s caused when spirits are near her. You’ve seen them glow before?”

She nodded. “It’s been happening since she was ten,” she said. “The villagers believe she can sense the *loup garou* that stalk the forests at night, and that when her eyes begin to glow, they are close and we must seek shelter. Because her gift protects the village, the villagers believe her eyes are a boon of the *nephilim*, a blessing to the village. She’s told us that the white dog appears when the *loup garou* are close, and when she sees him, she knows it isn’t safe to be outside. Her warnings have saved many villagers.”

“Clever, brother, clever,” Kyven noted as the husband angrily demanded translation, and Andra satisfied him. The white wolf lolled his tongue out playfully at the complement. “Well, her gift isn’t from these *nephilim*, Mistress Andra. She’s a Shaman. She’s sensitive to the spirits, and it’s the white wolf that was warning her when the monsters were near. As I said, the white wolf protects her. He is her guardian spirit, her *totem*. When he’s near her, it causes her eyes to glow, because that’s how she sees him. He warns her of the danger, and she warns the village.”

“What is this totem?” she asked after translating for Jallack.

He sighed. “It’s a bit hard to explain,” he said. “The simplest explanation is that there’s a special bond between your daughter and the white wolf. While some spirits watch over many humans, the white wolf watches only over her. And while most Shaman can seek out help from many different spirits, your daughter may only seek out help from the white wolf. They are a special pair, connected by powerful bonds.”

The woman translated, then Jallack chattered at her and gave Kyven an expectant look. “My husband wants to know what you intend to do with our daughter.”

“Well, to be honest, I thought she was much older,” he said, a bit sheepishly. “I was going to take her to Noraam so she might learn about her gifts, learn what it means to be a Shaman. Just because she’s born with the ability, there’s still a great deal of training involved,” he explained, pausing so Andra could translate. “After your daughter completed her training, well,

I guess it would be up to her what to do. She wouldn't be *forced* to become a full Shaman, but she would have to at least go on her Walk, learn about her connection to the spirits, so she might make her own decision. I was given that same choice, Mistress, and I chose to become a Shaman," he told them calmly. "I will not *force* your daughter to do *anything*. A person cannot be made to be a Shaman. It is something they must embrace willingly. And because she's so young, I'm not going to just take her, either. She needs the guidance and advice of her parents to decide what to do. But in the end, that choice must be hers, Mistress. Hers and hers alone."

That seemed to mollify both of them just a little bit, looking a lot less hostile after Jallack heard the translation. "Couldn't she learn here?" Darda translated.

Kyven shook his head. "She could only learn in Noraam. Besides, that is where she will be needed, and Shaman go where they are needed. It is our way."

"Why would they need her there?"

"I'll be honest, Mistress Darda...I don't know. The spirits haven't revealed their full plans to us yet, and when we don't understand, we simply have faith in their wisdom. The spirits are far wiser than we are, and we must trust them when we don't understand their full intent."

"So, you worship these spirits?"

"They're not gods, Mistress, though they have powers that make them much more than we," he answered. "The Shaman revere them and obey them, because we are the voice through which they speak into the mortal world."

"So, you are a man of the faith?"

"The Noraavi Trinity? No," he said bluntly. "The Loremasters have twisted the religion to be everything I stand against. I put my faith in my totem spirit."

“So, she *is* your god.”

“No, she’s no god,” he stated again. “But man can have faith in something and not worship it as a god.” He knew better than to go any deeper than that, since the shadow fox literally owned his soul. “My faith in my totem is a matter of duty and obedience, not worship. When she calls, I answer. When she directs, I obey. When I don’t understand the motive of her commands, I have faith in her wisdom, for she is wiser than me. I...trust her,” he said, almost having to force himself to say it. “I am a Shaman of the shadow fox,” he said proudly. “And when she needs me, I am there for her.”

Jallack spoke again, and Darda nodded. “What would she learn?”

“Wisdom,” he replied automatically. “She would learn wisdom, Mistress. The goal of any Shaman is to become wise, so we might better understand the commands of the spirits, who are far wiser than we, and better carry out their orders. It also helps us nurture and support those who are in need. The spirits teach us wisdom, so we might better serve both the spirits and the people who need us.”

“What do Shaman do exactly?” Darda asked.

“We serve,” he said simply. “Right now, I’m serving the Arcans, helping them as best I can, because they’re trapped in bondage. I understand slavery is against your religion?”

“It is,” she replied with a grave nod. “It is why the Noraavi aren’t allowed here in Espana. Gaul, I think your people call our land. So, you seek to end the bondage of the animal people?”

He nodded. “That’s what I’m doing right now, yes,” he replied. “Currently, war has broken out in Noraam. The twelve kingdoms learned that the Loremasters were about to betray them, and so they’ve gone to war. We Shaman are involved, helping the kingdoms against the Loremasters. In exchange, they are freeing the Arcans they capture while they fight, helping

to bring slavery to an end. That is our ultimate goal, to end slavery in Noraam and bring peace between the humans and the Arcans.”

“A noble pursuit,” Darda translated for Jallack, who nodded emphatically as he spoke. The girl suddenly rattled off quite a few sentences, making several motions, then she brought the steaming kettle over to the table and started pouring piping hot tea. “Andra wants to know how she’s supposed to learn from these spirits when she can’t understand them.”

Kyven laughed. “Brother wolf understands you just fine. It’s just me that can’t,” he replied.

As they drank tea, Kyven explained more and more about the Shaman and what was going on in Noraam, giving them information that probably wouldn’t get across the Angry Sea for months. They listened intently, interrupted quite often to ask questions, then asked his opinion on what Andra would be doing there. “Given that me and her are the only human Shaman, I’d venture to guess that the spirits want to show the humans they’re not what the Loremasters have said they are,” he mused, looking at the pretty young lady. “The spirits have decided that humans need Shaman. It’s why me and Andra are here. But the Loremasters have poisoned the people of Noraam against the Shaman, making up all kinds of wild and ridiculous stories, and from the sound of it, a lot of that propaganda made its way over here.”

Darda looked a trifle sheepish.

“We need to prove to the people that the Shaman aren’t their enemies, and for the average Noraavi, your daughter would be far better at that than I would. Noraavi men with any kind of culture in them won’t be rude to a lady, and that should let her get her foot in the door. I can’t say exactly what your daughter would do, but that seems the most sensible thing. A beautiful young lady who looks quite well mannered would woo the people far more than I ever could.”

“You seem quite polite to me,” Darda objected.

“Yes, but I’ve been fighting the Loremasters openly for over a year. They *know* I’m a human Shaman, and they’ve spread enough propaganda about me to make the average Noraavi citizen afraid of me. Most of that propaganda is true,” he chuckled. “My skills as a Shaman lean towards spying and skullduggery, Mistress. When the kingdoms want to know something, want something stolen, or a man killed, they call me, and that gives me a very bad reputation among the humans the Loremasters can influence. I’m a bad example.”

“You’re a thief?”

“When the situation demands it,” he admitted. “Actually, I’m a spy. And sometimes, a spy has to steal something that’s important for gathering information. Have you ever heard of the black fox Shaman?”

She gave him a look. “Some stories have reached us, yes,” she admitted. “Supposedly, this black fox attacked one of the great cities of Noraam, and was killed.”

“I’m the black fox Shaman, it’s the disguise I used back when I didn’t want the Loremasters to know I was a human,” he told her. “And most of Noraam *knows* I’m the black fox Shaman, knows it was just a disguise. So, would that make me a good choice to try to show the people that Shaman aren’t as bad as they were taught?”

She chuckled ruefully. “I see,” she nodded.

“Shaman do what they’re best at, Mistress. I’m sad to admit it, but I’m best at being a spy. I’m one of the Shaman that fights openly against the Loremasters, and I do it by spying on them. People have a preconceived impression of me based on the lies they’ve been told. Your daughter, on the other hand, would disarm them with her beauty and feminine charm, and change minds through words and actions, where I never could.”

“What of those kingdoms you’re helping?” she asked after translating.

“They’re even more afraid of me than the Loremasters,” he chuckled ruefully. “They tolerate me because of what I can do for them, and for no

other reason. My skills can be very...frightening to those who don't understand them, Mistress."

"Show me."

"I can, but understand that *my* skills will not be your daughter's skills. My skills come from my spirit, which isn't the white wolf. My spirit, the shadow fox, is a creature of guile and deceit. Those are the traits of illusion, making people see and hear things that aren't really there." He motioned to his side, his eyes glowing with the emerald radiance that marked his power in use, and the three of them gasped and flinched back a little when an illusion of Lightfoot appeared beside him. "This is an illusion, the image of a friend of mine," he told them. "She looks quite ordinary. But, while this is an illusion of what's real," he said, changing it. Jallack almost fell backwards out of his chair when a smaller version of the demon he'd created that morning stood in Lightfoot's stead. "This is something purely imaginary, and much more scary. Now imagine coming around a corner and meeting *this* face to face. That's why they're afraid of me," he told them easily. "But, it's not just limited to things like this creature." Andra gasped and looked around when their cozy kitchen seemed to dissolve away, leaving their table standing in the middle of a sunlit meadow that had a warm, gentle breeze blowing, purple snow-capped mountains in the distance. "When I'm around, they can't tell what's real and what's not, and that can be a *very* frightening thing," he told them, dismissing the illusion, returning them to their kitchen. Jallack reached down and put his hand on the floor, as if to make sure it was really there, then he gave Kyven a startled look. "You should tell him that those were just illusions, Mistress," he chuckled.

"Amazing. I could feel the breeze and the sun, and I could smell flowers!" Darda exclaimed, then she quickly soothed her husband and daughter by explaining what happened.

"I'd be a poor illusionist if I couldn't make you feel what wasn't there," he smiled slightly. "That's part of the way the illusion works. The

more you believe it, the more real it seems. If you believe it enough, you can actually touch an illusion.”

The daughter chattered at Darda. “She wants to know if she can learn to do that.”

Kyven shook his head. “Only Shaman of the shadow fox can do that,” he replied. “Her skills would depend on the white wolf.”

“And what are those?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But the wolf spirits are all fiercely loyal and nurturing, strongly attuned to healing energies. Your daughter would probably be a healer, but it would depend on her personal strengths and weaknesses as to what the wolf spirit would teach her.”

Kyven spoke less and less as the three of them began to discuss things, only answering the occasional question as they talked it over. He listened to their musical language for a while, and after it seemed that they no longer had need of him, he got up and wandered around the kitchen, then excused himself to relieve himself. He wasn’t about to do it inside using a chamber pot, as they did so, so he went back outside and found a nice bush. He saw that it was nearly dawn, which confused him more than a little bit. He’d only been here for a couple of hours, he was sure of it! He put that miracle out of his mind, however, because he could hear distant howling, and it wasn’t very friendly. Those had to be those *loup garou* monsters. Monsters were very rare outside of Noraam, because that was where the greatest concentration of crystals were, and it was the energy of the crystals that changed the animals and made them into monsters. But the Breach had had global reach, global effects, and the creation of monsters in Eusica and Fria were no doubt part of it. He seriously doubted that the monsters here had any powers like some of the monsters back home, but that didn’t mean that they weren’t dangerous. These people were quite afraid of them.

A small hawk spirit landed on his shoulder, which almost surprised him. The talons gripped his shoulder gently, and in that touch, there is communication. *Shaman Clover is quite distraught. They cannot find you,*

they cannot talk to you. The alchemy machines won't reach this far, the spirit told him. She bargained that I might come find you and assure that you are well, Shaman.

"I'm fine, sister hawk," he told her. "My totem sent me here at the behest of brother white wolf. He has found another human Shaman."

Impressive. Brother wolf always was quite the hunter, almost as good as me, the spirit replied, a bit playfully. Might you know when you will return?

"I'm not sure. Brother wolf wants me to bring the Shaman back to Noraam, but it turns out that she's very young. She's barely more than a child," he grunted. "Her parents are discussing the matter right now. I think the girl's intrigued and wants to go, but the parents aren't quite so enthusiastic." He chuckled. "She wanted to know if she could create illusions."

You are quite envied for that ability, she told him. But I don't think many Shaman understand what you had to give to get it. Few would pay that price.

"Wisely spoken, sister," he said in a grim tone.

I will return to Shaman Clover and tell her that you are well, but are unsure about when you will return.

"Thank you, sister hawk. I'll be back as soon as I can."

The sun began to rise, but the village, nestled within those ancient trees, was still gloomy and murky. Other villagers started to come out to begin the daily routines, and many of them took notice of Kyven. Several of them, dressed in simple homespun dresses, pants, and tunics, approached him and tried to talk to him, but he just said a few words in Noraavi and smiled, which told them he didn't speak their language. He stayed by the house of the girl, however, showing them that he wasn't just wandering around, standing next to their door, leaning against the moss-covered wall, simply waiting as they talked things over.

After about an hour, Darda finally came out, clearly looking for him. She looked at him as he turned to face her. "It is, what is the word... complicated," she told him. "Andra wishes to go, but my husband will not permit it."

"And what do you think?"

"To help those in need is one of the foundations of our religion, so for her to want to help is a good thing. She also has a great hatred for the evil that your people inflict on the animal-people. Our religion teaches that because they can be taught to understand the holy word of God, even the animal-people have souls, and as such, to enslave them is one of the greatest evils a man can inflict on another. But she is my daughter," she sighed. "She also has responsibilities to the village. Without her, we will not know when the *loup garou* are close."

"I heard them just before dawn," he noted. "Their howls. What do they look like?"

"They are like wolves, but they are much, much larger."

"Like Lupans?"

"What is a Lupan?"

"A wolf-like animal about yea big," he said, holding his hand above his own head. "At least the fully grown ones. I have two Lupan companions that are smaller," he added, putting his hand about at his own nose, "but that's because they're very young. Give them a few years, they'll be as big as the rest of their pack."

"That sounds like a *loup garou*," she affirmed.

"I'm surprised you have Lupans here."

"Legend has it they were brought here by a foolish man who sought to tame and breed them, but some escaped."

“That’d do it, Lupans are actually very intelligent,” Kyven grunted. “And over here, with no Ursorax or Wolverans to keep them in check, there’s nothing in the wild big enough to kill them except maybe a very angry bear.”

“As you say,” she agreed. “We can kill them with our rifles, but they are fast and clever. They always attack from ambush.”

“Well. How many Lupans are around?”

“We don’t know, but we think it’s just one pack.”

“If I arrange things so this pack leaves the village alone, would you allow Andra to come with me?”

“You can do this?”

“Not personally, but I know someone who can,” he grunted. “She might even be able to talk the Lupans into protecting your village, but they’ll demand compensation. You give them food, they leave you alone.”

“That’s a matter for the village, not just us,” she said. “Come, we will talk to the mayor.” She took his hand and started leading him away from the house, rather quickly.

Since he didn’t speak their language, he waited around as Darda took him to a cooper’s shop in the village, then had a long talk with the mayor. Darda motioned at him several times as she spoke to the very muscular man, with dark skin and black hair like Darda’s family, then the man approached him with Darda in tow. “He wants to know how you will do this,” she said.

“I know someone who can talk to Lupans,” he replied. “I’ll go get her and bring her back, we’ll track down the pack, then we’ll negotiate.”

“How can someone do this? The *loup garou* are animals!”

“She’s a Shaman,” he said simply. “Some Shaman know magic that lets them speak to animals, and even monsters. I can’t do it, but one thing I

can do is go get her and bring her back within a matter of minutes.”

Darda translated, and the man gaped at him and said something in a hushed voice. “He can’t believe you’re a magician,” she said.

Kyven raised his hand, opened his eyes to the spirits, and let several arcs of electricity dance along his fingers. The man took a step back, then laughed ruefully. “He accepts. We would be most appreciative if you could convince the *loup garou* to leave our village in peace. But understand, that may not change my husband’s mind.”

“That’s fine,” he shrugged. “Wait here. I’ll be back in about ten minutes or so.”

Both of them gasped when he converged a gateway into the shadow world, then he stepped into it. He felt the *things* relatively close by, but much to his surprise, they didn’t immediately start towards him. They seemed to...to *lurk*, like they remembered what he did to them. He started back for Noraam, each step covering hundreds of minars in the real world, and the *things* shadowed his movements but did not come any closer. He was right; they were studying him now. He’d done something that had proved that he could stop them cold, and now they were studying him, trying to puzzle out a way around his powerful defense. He cast about for Clover, and found her within a couple of minutes, converging a gateway back into the real world. He stepped out not into the early morning, but into the night, which stunned him. How could it be night here, but daytime in Eusica? It seemed, well, impossible! A startled guard gawked at him for a moment, then rushed up to him. “Shaman Kyven!” he said. “Are you alright?”

“Fine. I need Clover,” he said, stepping past and to Clover’s tent, which was near Danvers’ pavilion and with the tents of the other Shaman. “Clover,” he called.

Her tent flap burst open and he had a whole lot of coyote all over him. She gave him a fierce hug and licked his cheek, laughing lightly, then

pushed out to arm's length. "Sister hawk told me what you said, but I didn't expect you to come yourself to prove you were alright," she smiled.

"I need your help with something. Guard, we need some rope. It doesn't have to be very long, maybe ten rods or so."

"I'll go find some," he said with a quick salute, then he hurried off.

"What's going on?"

"The spirits found another human Shaman," he told her, which made her gasp.

"What was that? Another human Shaman?" Patience called from her tent, then she quickly boiled out of it. Hardstep and the others came out as well, and he was surrounded by brothers and sisters, laughing a bit as they all but mobbed him.

"She's Eusican," he told them. "That's where I've been, over in Eusica. She's barely more than a child, so I'm having some problems talking her parents into letting her come with me. Their village is having problems with a pack of Lupans, however, so I agreed to try to bargain something of a truce. So, I need you, you silly coyote," he said lightly, poking her in the belly.

"Well, I guess I can come help," she answered with a laugh, rubbing her belly. "Let me get my clothes, and we can go as soon as you believe it to be safe."

"It's safe now," he replied.

She went back to her tent, and he explained things to the others as she dressed. "Brother white wolf found her, and he's been watching over her," he told them. "I guess he felt she's old enough now, because she's starting to demonstrate her power. Sister shadow fox agreed to help, so she sent me to go get her."

"Another human," Hardstep mused. "It is a good thing."

“I agree,” Darkeyes agreed. The dark spotted feline nudged Kyven lightly. “After all, our brother here is somewhat acceptable.”

“Watch it, brother,” Kyven smiled. “I can do very mean things.”

He laughed. “As we all know so well,” he grinned toothily.

The guard ran back to them carrying a coil of rope. “This was the only one I could find, Shaman,” he said, a little out of breath.

“It’s fine,” he replied, taking it. “Thank you.”

He saluted and went back to his post, and it made Kyven muse a little bit over how Danvers’ army had accepted the Shaman. These men had their own grudges against the Loremasters, but it showed that even humans who had at first hated Kyven and the fact that he was a Shaman had changed their minds after seeing what Kyven was doing for them, but what was much more, being exposed to Shaman like Clover. Clover was gentle and kind, intelligent and compassionate, and it was hard to hate someone like her. Clover had done much to make the men in the army accept the other Shaman, even Kyven, and it gave him hope that maybe the rest of Noraam could change and come to accept the Shaman, to discount the stories and the lies and see the truth. The Shaman only had to show them who they really were, and with time and patience, things would hopefully change.

Clover came out wearing a somewhat tattered pair of leather breeches and a red shirt that ended at her ribs, showing off her flat furry belly. “I take it we’re going to shadow walk there?”

“Unless you can swim,” he said, tossing the end of the rope to her and beginning to tie his end around his waist.

“I’ve always been curious about it.”

“You won’t like it,” Patience warned.

“I’m not as weak-stomached as you, my sister,” she teased, which made the others laugh.

“Take her the *long* way, Kyven,” Patience told him, which made him smile wolfishly at Clover.

“She’ll lose her bluster,” he promised as he jerked on the rope and found the knot true. She tied off her end, and he wrapped a portion of the rope around his wrist. “Remember, keep moving and just follow the way the rope pulls,” he told her. “We have to travel some distance, so do your best.”

“I will manage without throwing up,” she said, giving Patience a teasing look.

“We’ll see what you’ve got, sister,” he said as he motioned, and a gateway converged of conjured shadow in front of him.

To her credit, she handled it far better than the other Shaman. She kept up, managing to not only keep her eyes on him, but keep up with him as he carried her along with him, keeping the rope taut as he kept his mind on the *things*. They were again stalking him, but would not approach him, keeping their distance just at what Kyven felt was what they thought was the outer edge of his perception. Even Clover could sense it, he realized as they neared the village. “I can feel them,” she said, keeping her eyes locked on him.

“They’re afraid of me at the moment. I did something new today, and they’re mulling it over.”

“What?”

“I repelled their attack, and they haven’t quite figured out how to get around it,” he replied as they reached the village. “As soon as they think they can get past my new trick, they’ll attack again. We’re here,” he announced, twisting a gateway out of the shadows of the fabric of the world. He had Clover go first, then he stepped out behind her. Much to her credit, she looked only slightly queasy, a hand on her stomach, then she blew out her breath as the mayor and Darda gaped at them, or more particularly, at Clover. “Darda, this is Clover, my sister Shaman,” he said as

he started working on the knot in the rope. “Clover, this is Mistress Darda, the girl’s mother.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Mistress,” Clover said, still with her hand on her stomach.

“Don’t throw up now, Patience will never let you live it down,” he teased.

She laughed. “It wasn’t as bad as I expected, but still, it was quite strange. I guess hearing you describe it so many times helped steel me for it.”

“Are you ill?” Darda asked.

“The way he travels, the place where he goes makes one feel a little nauseous,” she replied, blowing out her breath.

“It takes getting used to,” Kyven agreed as he untied the knot. “The rope’s so we don’t get separated. It’s hard to see in there unless you’re familiar with it, so it’s easy for someone traveling with me to get lost. That would be *very* bad.”

“Truly. I could barely see you, and you were little more than an arm’s length away.”

“Darda, sister Clover is going to help you with your *loup garou* problem,” Kyven said, and using that word made the mayor take notice. “We’ll find them and talk to them. What we need to know is what you want us to say. Should we ask them to avoid your village, or have you offer them food in exchange for protecting the village from other packs?”

She talked to the mayor, and they discussed things for a few moments, giving Clover time to get her stomach under control. She looked around, then chuckled. “I see it’s true. The sun does move across the world,” she said, looking at the rising sun. “Our world is round, friend, and the sun moves around it. Moving so far so fast, it’s easy to see it.”

“I was wondering about that,” he said. “I thought I was going crazy when the sun started rising here.”

“One of the many wonders of the world, my brother,” she smiled.

Darda turned back to them. “The mayor wishes to speak to the village about what we should do,” she declared.

“That’s fine, we have time,” Kyven said. “We can go find the Lupans while you’re discussing the matter.”

“Yes, but I would like to meet my new sister first,” Clover said eagerly.

“She doesn’t speak our language, sister, only Mistress Darda does.”

“That’s easy to fix,” she said with a smile. “I will bargain a boon from a spirit so she might be able to speak our language. Brother coyote is quite adept in the spoken words, he could teach our new sister Noraavi.”

“Still, given that her father is a bit antsy, we should wait until she’s there.”

“As you see fit, my brother,” she smiled. “Let’s go find those Lupans.”

After they were far enough away from the village, Kyven took the fur from Danna and loped with Clover along the huge, ancient trees, the canopy making the forest floor a strange landscape of dark shadows and large brown trunks. Some of the trees had exposed roots around the thick trunks, some didn’t, and gentle hills and folds in the land made a surprising number of places for animals to hide despite the lack of underbrush. They stopped often to test the scents on the ground, and Kyven was certain that they were indeed Lupans when they finally crossed one of their old trails. “Hours old,” Clover noted as she took her turn testing the ground with her nose. “They went that way.”

“If they’re like wild Lupans, then they have a territory,” Kyven reasoned. “So they can’t be too far away.”

“Lupans have territories in the hundreds of square minars, brother,” Clover said. “But the village represents a temptation for easy food, so they probably have it at the center of their territory.”

“If it’s the only village around, yeah,” Kyven grunted. “I heard them howling in the night, so they shouldn’t be too far off.”

It took them about an hour to find them. It was a very small pack, just two full-size adults, two juveniles, and three pups, and none of them looked all that burly. They were all very thin, almost on the verge of starvation. The two Shaman coming up on them by stealth as they dozed after eating a kill. Their meal was two freshly killed carcasses of some kind of deer that had to be half the size of a red-tail. Kyven realized that if those deer were any indication of the size of the game here in this part of Eusica, the pack would probably never get any bigger. Such huge animals needed a lot of food to survive, and when the game was so small, they either had to over hunt their territory and starve, or subsist on what little they could get. Without the megafauna that existed in Noraam, wild cattle, buffalo, red-tails and white-tails, the Lupans had very little to eat. Granted, there were no Uursorax or Wolverans here to prey on them, but the price they were paying was almost never having a full belly.

No wonder they were threatening the humans. Lupans actually didn’t like humans, they tasted terrible, but hunger was driving this pack to prey on anything it could catch. And if they couldn’t catch a straggling human because of Andra, what livestock the village may possess was a tempting target.

“Their den,” Clover whispered, taking note of the faint wind that managed to get down to the forest floor. They hunkered down when two juveniles started growling at each other, their hackles up, the two pony-sized animals baring their fangs and moving with slow, steady, measured steps. “Dominance,” she breathed to him, and he nodded. Like wolves, Lupans had a hierarchy, and the two juveniles were probably continuing a running issue over which of them had higher rank. Such things often led to fights, though they were rarely fatal.

“We should go back,” Kyven told her. “We can come back later, they’ll stay close to their pups.”

She nodded, and they retreated, then loped easily back to the village. Kyven made sure to return to his human form before coming within sight, and when they arrived, the entire village was gathered outside, near the mayor’s house. They were listening to Darda talk, then the mayor talked, then a few of the villagers called out in their musical language. The entire village absolutely stared at Clover as they came down to the edge of the gathering, about 50 people, and it occurred to Kyven that they had to have some farmland somewhere...maybe on the other side of the village. They had probably never seen an Arcan before, only heard stories about them, and Clover took notice of all the attention she was getting but took it in stride. One old lady, however, did get up and shake her finger in Kyven’s face in an accusatory manner, at least until Darda called her down. She looked a bit sheepish, mumbled a few words, then patted Kyven on the forearm and returned to her seat on a little stool, which was what they were all using for seats. Kyven and Clover walked through them, back to Darda and the mayor. “Well, we found your *loup garou*, and they’re definitely Lupans,” Kyven told her. “But talking to them may not be easy.”

“Why not?”

“They’re half-starved,” Clover said. “When an animal is hungry, they sometimes are not easy to talk with. They may agree to leave you alone today, but hunger may drive them to raid the village in a month. And honestly, you cannot blame them. Hunger can drive both man and beast to extremes.” She looked to Darda. “How long have they been here, Mistress?”

“For years,” she replied. “Decades.” She pursed her lips and looked to Kyven. “Could you not take them away, like you left and brought your friend?”

Kyven blinked. “Move a pack of half-starved wild Lupans through the shadows?” he said, a bit incredulously. But when Clover gave him a

speculative look, he frowned at her. “Can you imagine what that’s going to be like, Clover?” he protested. “If the shadow world doesn’t scare them into attacking out of panic, they’re going to be almost impossible to keep moving in the same direction!”

“Can you think of anything else?” she replied. “We can’t just leave them here, brother. They’ll either starve to death or continue to terrorize the humans. They don’t *belong* here. They are Lupans, they belong on Noraam, where they can get enough to eat.”

“That’s—Clover!” he blustered. “You’re serious!”

She simply nodded. “Everyone wins,” she said soothingly. “The Lupans can return to their natural habitat where they can find enough food to thrive, and the humans can live without fear.”

“It would save our village much grief if you could take them away,” Darda wheedled a bit. “They have haunted us for many years, and here in the last few years, it’s not even safe to leave sight of the village.”

“They’ve almost hunted out their territory, hunger has driven them to prey on the humans, something they wouldn’t normally do. They’ll die in the next couple of years if we don’t act, brother. It is our duty. The Lupans *need* us.”

Kyven sighed. “Alright, we can try, sister. But you’re helping,” he said, pointing at her. “If they don’t fly into an immediate panic the instant we go in, they might spook and bolt inside, and I don’t much like the idea of trying to play tug of war with terrified Lupans.”

“We’ll come up with something,” she said assuredly, smiling at him. “Blindfolds perhaps, or we can hobble them. Or maybe both.”

“Yeah, *you* explain it to them when you’re tying their legs together,” he grunted.

Darda explained things to the villagers, who all gave them surprised and hopeful looks. They started talking among themselves again, but Kyven

and Clover both weren't paying attention to them. Jallack and Andra were approaching them, Jallack looking a little annoyed. Andra took Clover's hands when she offered them, looking down at the smaller young lady with a gentle smile, then she patted Andra on the shoulders. "Such a beautiful young lady," she said in her sweetest voice. Andra couldn't understand her words, but the rich, gentle, welcoming tone in Clover's voice made her smile. "I am Clover, my new sister. Clover," she said, patting her upper chest with her fingers.

"Andra D'Alaro," she mirrored, pointing at herself, then she chattered away in her native language, looking Clover up and down, clearly all but enthralled by the sight of an Arcan. She dared pinch a little of Clover's grayish-brown fur on the side of her neck, then touched the black fur around her muzzle.

"She's never seen an Arcan before," Kyven reasoned. "I don't think any of them have."

"I'd be surprised if she had, this is Eusica," Clover replied calmly. "The Eusican kingdoms don't permit slaves here, so Arcans aren't even allowed to be on ships that dock in their cities, because they believe that all Arcans are enslaved."

"We don't permit slavery, but we won't let the slaves come here to be free. That's quite a position," Kyven grunted.

"They simply don't know us, that's all," she said with a smile, leaning over and licking Andra on the side of her face. The girl spluttered, then giggled, smiling up at Clover. Darda joined them, then listened to both Andra and Jallack take turns speaking, Andra quite firmly, Jallack with a hint of steel in his voice.

"My daughter wishes to go. She is quite taken with the idea that she might learn to do real magic, just like in the stories we told her as a girl. My husband is opposed," she explained. "As am I. She is too young to be by herself."

“This is Eusica,” Clover said calmly. “Kyven, buy her hand in marriage.”

“*What?*” he gasped.

“If they are true believers of the father and the son, they must entertain a serious bid for marriage,” she replied simply. “If you can meet their marriage price, they must give Andra over to you. Given her beauty, that price would be fairly high,” she mused with a light smile.

“You know our ways,” Darda said, a bit startled.

“I only *look* like an animal, mistress,” she said with a toothy smile. “But I am a Shaman. Shaman know many things. Knowledge is but one path to wisdom.”

“You’re serious,” Kyven grunted.

“Deadly,” Clover replied. “And I think removing the Lupans from the area could be but one part of the marriage price. After all, it benefits *everyone*, so it has high worth. You can bargain a marriage price with them, and once it is met, Andra can come with us.”

“I’m gonna lose an ear explaining this one to Danna,” he sighed, which made Clover laugh.

The business of bargaining a marriage price out of Darda and Jallack almost made him lose his temper, because they were pretty much against Andra leaving the village and going to Noraam. She was their only daughter, and she was very important in the village, so Kyven suspected they didn’t want to lose some of their status, on top of losing the little girl they obviously doted upon. Once Andra realized what was going on, however, she put her own hand in, bickering with her parents more than once as they sat in the D’Alaro cottage and discussed the matter. What aggravated Kyven was that every time he thought they were getting somewhere, the parents would demand something outrageous as part of the marriage price, obviously trying to prevent it. Clover had quite effectively breached the stone wall of *no* they had prepared, using their own religious

customs against them, but they were fighting tooth and nail to make sure Kyven either could not or would not meet their outrageous demands.

Wisdom, however, finally held sway. Kyven could tell that Andra wanted to go, and that was how he attacked her parents...with outright blackmail, combined with a dash of deceit. “Mistress Darda, to be honest about it, you can’t *force* Andra to stay here,” he said after nearly three hours of fruitless debate, made almost intentionally slow when Darda had to translate back and forth. “I’m quite willing to pay you a fair price for the loss of your daughter’s help around the house and the social status she gives you in the village, but to be honest about it, I don’t have all day here.” He paused as she translated. “But, if you don’t want to be fair, if you want to go against your own daughter’s wishes, well, I don’t necessarily have to be fair either,” he continued. Darda gave him a hot look, then translated that. “After all, I can come and go as I please, and you’ll never know when I’m around. If you don’t want to be fair, well, some day I might just *happen* to come visit, find Andra by herself, and she might just *happen* to decide to go back with me on her own. She’ll do what she wants to do, and you’ll get not a single chit or pig for your trouble.”

Jallack overturned his chair when he heard the translation, shaking a finger at Kyven and shouting, but Kyven simply leaned back in his chair and put his feet up on their tea table. Andra was giving him a sudden grin. “You would steal our daughter?” Darda snapped hotly.

“No. I would simply be nearby someday when she decided to go to Noraam,” he replied easily. “And I’m telling you straight out that you’re not going to keep her here if she doesn’t want to stay. She is my sister Shaman, and I’ll be here to help her, any way she needs it. If that means that I have to provide her with a means to run away from home, then that’s what I’ll do. But, we can avoid all of that,” he said, looking at Darda. “I can meet a reasonable marriage price, Mistress Darda, and since I *can* come and go, that means that you’ll see her again if you really want to. If you’re willing to face the shadow world, I’d be happy to help you cross the Angry Sea and see your daughter, taking you to Noraam the same way I brought Clover here.”

Jallack and Darda fell into a heated discussion, with Andra interrupting several times to talk, then Darda gave him a dark look. “We will not offer you a marriage price,” she said, a bit icily.

Kyven sighed. “If that’s the way it’s going to be, then that’s the way it’s going to be,” he said. Darda screamed when Kyven kicked backwards and rolled back with the chair as it fell, then he quite literally dropped out of sight, his body swallowed up by a converged shadow gateway placed on the floor under him, then he rolled over to his knees within the shadow world, opened another one just in front of him, then reached out through it. The D’Alaros saw Kyven’s disembodied hand reach out of a swirling disc of shadow directly over Andra’s head, hook under her arm, and she gave a cry of surprise when he yanked her up and into it. Kyven didn’t give her a chance to get sick, converging another gateway immediately and pulling her out, which set them outside, about ten rods from Andra’s front door. She looked at him a little wildly, looking around, then she laughed brightly. That laughter caused a commotion within the house, and the front door was torn open with Jallack taking up the entire doorway, looking on in both anger and surprise. Darda looked under Jallack’s thick arm, her eyes wide and look of both panic and relief on her face. “I think I’ve proved my point?” Kyven asked calmly. “Either accept a fair price or get nothing, Mistress Darda. I’ll leave that choice to you.”

The parents were furious, but they knew when they were on the short end of things. Kyven had demonstrated that he could *take* Andra if it came down to it, and since she wanted to go, she wasn’t going to fight him off when he appeared. They returned to the table and the parents got a lot less outrageous, and when they did so, Kyven became quite willing to compromise. However, the one thing he wouldn’t permit, no matter how much they begged or demanded, was for him to take them with her so they could live together. “She can’t learn the wisdom of the spirits while still under the sway of her parents,” he said adamantly. “She will live by herself, but with others very close by to help her if she needs it. That is the Shaman way. I can bring her back when she wants to visit, but that’s as far as I’m going to go.”

“That is unacceptable! She’s still a child!”

“She’s going to learn the wisdom of the spirits. She’s going to grow up, Mistress Darda, *quickly*. She’ll be well cared for until she’s mature enough to make it on her own, I can assure you of that. She’ll be living among the Arcans at first, and the Shaman are revered among them. And trust me, if they see that she can’t protect herself, just about every Arcan alive would fight to the death to protect her. Trust me, she’ll be very safe. Hell, I’m a full Shaman, and I have enough problems with them trying to *protect* me,” he snorted.

They almost broke down over that point, but eventually, they got back to the point at hand. They were more and more unhappy with him, but they knew that they were bargaining from the sinking end of the boat. Andra was going with him no matter what, and it was just a matter of how much they got for her. But, to their credit, they cared far more about Andra than they did about getting rich by selling her marriage rights. Kyven could respect that.

Eventually, a bargain was reached. Kyven would pay them in pure gold, one thousand coins of it, he would remove the Lupans from the village’s outskirts, and he would ensure they got regular updates as to the health and welfare of Andra. He would deliver letters back and forth once a month, and whenever Andra wanted to visit her parents, he would bring her. Kyven found those to be fair terms, and he agreed, if only because he wasn’t really sure how much a thousand gold pieces was worth. But it was gold, and gold, well, that wasn’t going to be a problem. He’d need Clover for that, but the gold was easily attainable. They gave him some strange looks when he asked them how much one of the gold pieces they demanded weighed, but they showed him a silver coin and told him that it would be about the same size. When he asked them if it was just the weight of the gold that mattered, if they would accept it he brought them the same weight in gold as nuggets, they agreed.

That was all he needed. Clover was out in the village, being followed around by about all of the village’s children, who watched her tail with

almost hypnotic fascination, and the children gasped and scattered when she turned quickly and headed for him, a little scared of her but also utterly enthralled by her exotic appearance. “How did it go?”

“We made a deal,” he replied, putting his hand on her shoulder. “I’m afraid I bargained you into a hole, sister. They demand a thousand gold coins the same size and weight as this one,” he said, holding up the silver piece.

“Easily done, brother, an earth spirit can find it for us,” she said with a smile, taking it from him, weighing it in her hand. “Would they accept gold dust and nuggets, or do they demand these coins?”

“They just want that weight in gold, no matter what form it’s in. Strange that they use gold as a currency.”

“They don’t have enough crystals here to make chits. And think, brother. Soon, Noraam will have to find a new currency, once there are no more milk crystals to make into chits. Odds are, Eusican coins will become the new money of Noraam, since the port traders already keep Eusican money on hand to trade with them. They don’t take chits,” she told him. “Soon, we’ll be using these gold and silver coins too.”

“Huh. Well, Haven will be a rich nation, then,” Kyven mused.

She gave him a sly smile. “It will indeed, since we don’t have to go mine the metal,” she winked.

Clover invited Andra to watch *real* magic of a sort that only Shaman could perform, and since Clover conducted the summoning outside, she also attracted quite a crowd of villagers. Kyven and Clover sat facing each other at opposite ends of a circle she drew in the dirt, then she bent to the task of summoning an earth spirit.

The elemental spirits were slightly different from the living spirits of the spirit world. They too lived in the spirit world, but since they represented the elemental forces, they had different personalities. Kyven couldn’t call upon elemental spirits any more he could call on any spirit

other than the shadow fox, but that wasn't an issue for him, since he could get his things other ways. Clover, he'd come to learn, was one of the most adept spirit bargainers among the Shaman. She had a magnetic personality, and that natural charm helped a great deal when dealing with spirits. She could talk quite favorable bargains out of spirits, because they *liked* her.

The villagers gaped and gasped and recoiled and whispered furiously when Clover's eyes began to glow, a steady yellow-amber radiance not far from the color of her eyes. Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits as well, to see it when it appeared, and that made the villagers whisper even more. Clover called to the spirit mentally, making no sound, and it answered quickly. It looked like a pile of stones rising up out of the ground, but since it was a spirit, it was insubstantial and opaque, surrounded in a faint greenish nimbus. And since her powers were untrained, the presence of the spirit incited Andra's spirit sight as well, which made many of the villagers call out in warning and start looking towards the forest.

"Tell them that the Lupans aren't coming," Kyven said in a calm voice. "Clover, could you ask the earth spirit to become visible? That way they see what Andra sees."

She nodded, looking at the spirit with a calm expression, then he could tell that it manifested into the physical world, which made quite a few of the villagers gasp and recoil a little. They'd never seen anything like it before. Clover conducted her negotiation without making a sound, a serene look on her face, then she smiled and nodded and reached out her hands to the spirit. It surged forward a little and let her put her hands on either side of the stone that was at the top, like its head, then it sank into the ground. "He agrees," she told him. "He'll have the payment ready for us within the hour."

"Good work, sister," he said with a nod. "I hope it didn't cost too much?"

"Nothing I am not happy to give in return," she said with a smile, and she said no more. The bargains between Shaman and spirits were personal and not discussed, at least usually. Kyven was something of a special case,

since he was a great example of what *not* to do when bargaining with spirits.

“That was one of these spirits?” Darda asked.

“An earth spirit, yes,” Clover replied as she easily returned to her feet. “He agreed to help us. While he works on that, let us go take care of the Lupans, brother. Mistress Darda, might we have a good length of rope and several rags or swaths of unneeded cloth or leather? We’re going to need it.”

Kyven and Clover bounded off towards the den as Kyven worked out how he was going to do this. Approaching the Lupans might be tricky because they’d been preying on humans, but once he got in among them, the *real* trick was going to convince them to let them tie them all together and take them through the very unnatural shadow world. Despite being so thin, the adult Lupans could easily drag Kyven and Clover both all over creation if they decided to run, so the major issue was going to be keeping them calm.

Once they got close to the den, Kyven enacted the amulet to return to his human form and approached warily, with Clover up a tree. They were gambling here, gambling that Kyven’s monster-friendly scent would be enough to keep them from attacking, but he was on a knife’s edge from converging a gateway if he had to run. The puppies noticed his scent first, coming out of the den with their noses up and their tails wagging, and the two thin, almost malnourished pups ambled towards him as fast as their little legs would allow, yipping and tails wagging. One of the juveniles came out of the den immediately afterward, a young, raw-boned female that was a good two rods smaller than Sirra, and she growled and advanced towards Kyven uncertainly, her fangs bared. Kyven just sat on the ground and let the puppies jump excitedly on his legs, then he held his hand out to the young female. She perked her ears up and advanced a few more steps, sniffing at him, then she padded over and sat beside him, sticking her nose in his hair and snuffling, making him laugh reflexively. “The others out hunting, little girl?” he asked in a soft voice, but he already knew that

answer. “Clover, we need them to return. Tell her to call them. If she howls, they’ll respond.” The female growled again when Clover started down the tree, coming into sight, but Kyven put a calming hand on her neck even as Clover called out to her. Her ears picked up again and she turned her head quizzically, then she tilted her head back and howled, loud enough for Kyven to wince and put a hand over the ear facing her.

Clover remained safely high enough up one of the smaller trees that she could sit on a limb without being sixty rods off the ground, and Kyven stayed in the clearing, the female getting a little playful as the pups play-battled each other half on his lap, all squeaky growls and yips and yaps. It didn’t take long for the adults and other juvenile to return, and when they saw Kyven surrounded by their youngers, the two adults immediately rushed him. Kyven startled the two pups when he rose quickly to his feet, converging a gateway behind himself even as Clover shouted out, speaking so the Lupans could understand her, telling them to stand down. That made them pull up short, and once they caught his scent, their hackles came down and they approached him curiously. He greeted them carefully and let them inspect him, sniffing at his chest and arms, their noses getting dangerously close to his throat. They decided to accept him, however, at least for now.

Clover came down out of the tree and approached very slowly, talking to them as she did so. Kyven listened as she told them about taking them somewhere where they’d have plenty of food, a new territory, a new range, but first they’d be cared for by friends, fed well, and allowed to rest and regain their strength. Once they were healthy, they could go establish their own territory. They seemed interested in her offer, since they’d been going hungry for a long time, but when Clover promised them all they could eat when they arrived at their destination, that persuaded them.

“Alright, this isn’t going to be easy,” Kyven said as he started measuring out the rope. “Moving in there takes will, and I don’t think the Lupans can focus enough will to force themselves to move. They’ll just walk in place. So, on top of being all tied together, we have to be *touching* them, Clover. We’ll carry the pups, I’ll guide the adults, you guide the

juveniles. We grab a handful of fur and guide them along, and we pray to the spirits they don't panic."

"Would blindfolds help?"

"Maybe, but it won't stop the nausea, and that's what I'm worried about most," he grunted. "Explain to them what we have to do while I get the ropes measured out."

The Lupans did *not* look happy over the ropes, but they endured for that promise of all they could eat. Kyven tied himself to the two adults, then to Clover, who tied herself to the juveniles. They fashioned slings for the two puppies, and even tied them into them so they couldn't wriggle out and try to run when inside. Kyven urged the adults into position, then knelt between them. "Alright, repeat this back to them, sister," he began, patting the adults on their necks. "It's going to be dark and hard to see inside. The ground will shift and move like water, and you'll feel sick at your stomach." He let her repeat that. "I can see where we're going, so let me guide you with my hands. I'll hold onto your fur and guide you in the direction we need to go. It's very important not to be afraid. Lupans are brave animals, and I trust you not to try to run away. If you get lost in there, I may not be able to find you again to help you get out. Make sure you stress that, sister," he grunted. She repeated it, making sure to stress that they could *not* try to run away, that it might cause them to get lost. She added the *things* herself, telling them that there were predators within that would try to eat them if they got separated, but since they were deathly afraid of Kyven, it was safe with him.

Kyven blew out his breath. "Alright, let's do this, sister," he grunted, converging a gateway about five rods away, so the Lupans could see it, then he stood up. "Let's go."

It was far easier than he expected. To their credit, the Lupans didn't panic or bolt, but he heard them whine in fear from the minute they stepped inside. Both the adults kept their eyes down on the ground, or what passed for it, and let Kyven guide them with firm grips on the fur on their neck.

Once Clover and the juveniles were in, he started them out. The puppies had it the worst, crying in fear and shivering in their slings, struggling against the ropes that literally tied them in, and he felt the *things* lurking close by as they moved, daring to get closer, approaching Clover from behind. Kyven stopped briefly and stretched the space behind Clover as a warning that he knew what they were up to, and that caused them to retreat to a certain distance and keep that distance as they started moving again. He took them to their destination, then converged a gateway in front of the adults and urged them through it even as he willed it to pass over him. Once he was out, he kept his focus on it, causing it to pass over Clover and the juveniles, and then he dismissed it.

It was midmorning on the grassy field in the center of Vanguard, and their arrival was noticed almost immediately. Kyven barked in alarm when several Arcan children rushed towards them, causing them to stop short, and he knelt down and started untying the ropes. “We’re here. Someone go get the chief!” he shouted.

Darik rumbled out of his forge almost immediately, who was the village chief. He preferred to be called *mayor*, however. “Shaman! Bless me, it’s good to see you again!” he called as he approached.

“Darik, I need you to go find all the meat you can get your hands on and bring it for these Lupans,” Clover told him. “They are very hungry and weakened. This village will nurse them back to health. Is Tallspan here?”

“He’s with the army, Shaman, a youngling Shaman named Rainsong is performing his duties.”

“I know her. She needs to be here.”

“I’ll go get her, Shaman!” Chaser called, then ran off on her sturdy legs. The Arcan had grown considerably since he’d last seen her. The canine had been just a girl when he’d seen her, but now she was well into adolescence, and was starting to fill out.

Rainsong arrived about the same time as the first delivery of buffalo meat, which Darik laid out close by. Clover told them that the human and Arcans would bring them meat until they couldn't possibly eat any more, and they released the Lupans to their meal. Rainsong was a cougar, like Firetail, but she was *very* young, barely more than an adult. She was also surprisingly short, barely taller than Lightfoot. She hugged Clover fondly, then hugged Kyven. "I'm glad to finally meet you, brother," she said. "I just returned from my Walk last month, and instead of sending me to the army, they bade me come here to greet our brothers and sisters who found their way to us."

"It's good to meet you too, sister," he said. "We brought you something other than Arcans, though," he gestured at the Lupans. "We need you to nurse them back to health. They've been starving for a while."

"Did the humans cage them?"

"Actually, they're from Eusica, they escaped from some fool that had taken them there, and there's nothing over there big enough for them to eat. So they've been starving slowly over the years, never getting enough food," he grunted.

"Poor things. We'll take good care of them, brother," she nodded.

"Can you speak to them, sister?" Clover asked.

"No, but I can bargain with a spirit to explain things to them when necessary," she replied. "I'll have a barn made up for them to use as a den while they recover. Once they're rested and recovered, we can let them go find their own territory."

"I'll explain it to them."

The Lupans were almost impossible to move, however, once more meat in front of them than they'd seen at one time in their entire lives, being carried out by Darik and the village Arcans. They instead started putting it in the barn southeast of the village that Rainsong had set up for them to use as a den, making sure it had straw and blankets for sleeping, moving out

some of the more dangerous farm implements, then having Clover finally convince them to go to the barn once they finished the meat Darik brought them. Clover explained to them that they'd be resting in the barn while the village fed them and helped them regain their strength, stressing that they were not to hunt *anything* while they were at the village, that the humans, Arcans, and their livestock were off limits. The village would provide all the meat they could eat, and their primary focus was to rest and recover their strength. She made sure to stress that once they were recovered, they would be free to go establish their own territory, but they should never hunt humans or Arcans, because there were buffalo and elk and red-tails and many other things big enough for them to hunt and eat.

Kyven, Clover, and Rainsong watched from the doorway as the Lupans continued to eat, then Rainsong chuckled. "This is the first time Vanguard has welcomed Lupans," she noted. "How goes the war, my friends?"

"We're winning," Kyven chuckled. "We're spreading through the Smoke mountains now, and once we have it under our control, the humans will think twice about trying to invade them."

"That's good," she nodded. "Not that there's ever a true victor in war, but in this one case, I can pray to the spirits for there to be one."

"Well said," Clover nodded.

"We'd better get back, sister, before Darda and Jallack change their minds," he prompted.

"Yes, we should. Anything you want me to tell them before we go, sister?"

"No, I think we have it under control, sister. Thank you for coming to see me!"

"Any time, youngling," she chuckled, hugging the small cougar. Kyven gave her an embrace as well, then he took the rope end Clover threw to him.

They got back to late-evening Eusica to find the village going about its business. Kyven and Clover went back to the D'Alaro house, and when he knocked, Darda opened the door immediately, a wild look on her face. In the common area, a large pile of gold nuggets sat on the floor, and Jallack was looking at it like it was a live snake. They stepped in, and Clover chuckled. "The earth spirit was punctual, I see," she noted.

"The Lupan pack is gone, Mistress," Kyven told her. "We took them to Noraam. They won't bother you again."

"And I see that you have received your gold, so with your permission, we will take Andra with us now," Clover said, a touch firmly. "We must get her to Noraam so she might begin to learn about her powers."

"Remember our bargain," Darda said, her eyes misting.

"I'll bring you letters from her once a month, on the full moon, as promised. And when she has time, I'll bring her to visit. I fulfill my bargains, Mistress."

"Alright," she said, sniffing a little, then she called Andra.

Kyven and Clover stood a respectful distance as the parents said teary farewells to the white-haired teenager, who hugged them and spoke soothingly to them. She'd brought down a little cloth bag holding her belongings, and when she picked it up quite deliberately and came over to Kyven, Darda broke out into tears. Andra called gently to her, then she opened the door of the house. Kyven and Clover followed her out, then she closed the door and took a deep, cleaning breath. She pulled a little cross out from under the bodice of her homespun dress, kissed it, then tucked it back and looked at Kyven expectantly.

"I think she's impatient, brother," Clover chuckled.

"Works for me. I'm getting a little tired, and us flaunting ourselves to the *things* is probably rubbing them a little raw, so I'd like to get safely back to the army."

“We can keep her with us until I arrange for her to learn Noraavi, then brother wolf will take charge of her training. Most likely, one of us will be the one teaching her the basics, as Stalker taught you.”

“Works for me,” he said again, taking up the rope. “Now let’s get this done.”

Chapter 18

Andra was a very, very curious young lady.

After Patience bargained with the coyote to teach her Noraavi, Cajar, and Flauren, the three languages of Noraam, Kyven got an insight into her personality, and he was both impressed and a little worried.

She was almost fanatically devoted to her religion, what the Noraavi called the Father and Son, but most just mistakenly called them sun worshippers, mistaking *son* for *sun*. She was so devoted to her religion that she might have become a nun had Kyven not spirited her away. This worried Kyven, because while the spirits weren't gods, the Shaman were devoted to them, and for the Arcans, the Shaman and the spirits more or less *were* their religion. But, that devotion was also what brought her to Noraam, because she believed in her heart and soul that slavery was immoral and evil, and it was her moral and religious duty to stand against it. The Eusicans considered the Arcans to be people, called them the *animal people*, and as such, it was one of the gravest sins a man could commit to enslave another. That was why most Eusican countries and kingdoms didn't even allow Noraavi to enter their lands. Only Briton and Normandia permitted Noraavi traders, but those ships could not have a single Arcan anywhere on them...and they were thoroughly inspected upon docking. Her religious convictions had brought her to Noraam, but he was a bit worried that they were going to cause her a lot of trouble when she started her Walk, for he was almost certain that one of the first things that the wolf would teach her was that sometimes, a Shaman had to act against his own personal convictions. For someone as deeply rooted in her religious morals as Andra, this was going to be a *major* problem.

Outside of that, Andra was a very personable and intelligent young lady. She was highly curious, almost fearlessly sociable, and she was a very

engaging and charismatic girl. Within the first day, she had about half the army wrapped around her little finger, and the Arcans were almost enthralled by her because she was so curious about them. She talked to every Arcan she could find, asked them all kinds of questions, listened to them. She'd never met an Arcan before Clover, and she was testing what she'd learned about Arcans in her village against the reality. The Arcans were at first a little nervous about her attention, but when word got out that she was a fledgling Shaman, they flocked to her both to get to know her and so they could protect her.

Kyven hadn't been kidding about that. The new center of the army was wherever Andra happened to be at that time, and there were several near-fights between Arcans and humans when the humans got uncomfortably close to the young Shaman. Just about every Arcan in the army wanted to protect her, and it got so bad that Danvers had to assign six Arcans to be her escorts and bodyguards. The competition for who got to be one of those protectors was fierce, but the result was that Andra had six of the toughest, strongest, most dangerous Arcans in the army following her around almost all the time.

Kyven almost expected to be the one that would have to at least start her training, and he was not wrong. Both the white wolf and the shadow fox came to him the day after bringing her back, and told him that they wanted him to explain the basics to her, what to expect and what it would mean, as well as when and where it was going to begin. It was not going to be a good conversation, and it wasn't one that he wanted to give in public.

So, along with his own nannies, Sirra, and Dauro, Kyven rode with Andra at the tail end of the army, lagging further and further behind, until they were far enough away to talk privately. "The spirits have decided what to do," he told her as he patted Vasha on the neck. "They want to start your training in five days. I'm supposed to take you to Vanguard so you might begin your training, where you'll train with Rainsong for the first phase."

"What is that?" she asked.

“Physical, mainly,” he told her. “The magic we use, Andra, is extremely demanding, and the way you are right now, it would kill you to channel a candle flame,” he said honestly. “It takes nearly superhuman strength and endurance to use Shaman magic. The first thing you’ll do is train your body so you can handle the demands the magic will place on you. And I’ll tell you right now, girl, it won’t be fun. There were times during my own training when I thought it was going to kill me. But when it’s over, you’ll be about three times stronger than any woman, able to arm wrestle most men, and beat them.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “But don’t worry about it making you look, you know, *manly*,” he said, which made her giggle. “I’m not exactly muscle-bound, but I’m about twice as strong as most men, and I can run a horse to death. That’s the kind of conditioning you’ll need before you even attempt your first spell.” He glanced back at Lightfoot, who was ghosting their backtrail along with Lucky, teaching the boy the art of tracking and scouting. “After you’ve conditioned your body, you’ll begin your Walk. And I’ll be honest, Andra, you won’t like it,” he said darkly. “Wisdom is not as gentle or as nice as most people believe.”

“What do you mean?”

“Wisdom isn’t just understanding things, Andra. It’s about doing things that you won’t like to do. When I went on my walk, my spirit had to teach me how to kill,” he said bluntly. “But what she was teaching me more than *how* to kill was to understand *when* it was necessary to kill. There are times, girl, when killing is necessary. That’s part of the wisdom that you’ll learn, knowing when you use a gentle hand, and when you use a club.”

“Murder is against God,” she declared immediately.

“And that’s the first thing they’re going to teach you, Andra,” he sighed. “That your convictions are a good thing, but you can’t let them blind you to the realities of the world. Killing is indeed wrong. I hate to do it. It’s also against the basic nature of my spirit, for whom killing is the last

resort. But we're not just in a war here, we're also fighting to free the Arcans from slavery." He looked at her. "Do you think the humans are just going to pull the collars off their Arcans when you show up and tell them to free them?" he asked bluntly.

She looked about to say something, then she frowned.

"I know it's much easier to *daydream* about something than it is to *do* it," he told her compassionately. "But that's part of what you need to understand. The Walk is going to challenge your religious convictions. They're not going to do it on purpose, but what they *will* do is make you understand that sometimes, what you believe to be wrong is exactly what you have to do in order to do the *right* thing."

"The ends justify the means?"

"Sometimes they do," he agreed without hesitation. "But sometimes they don't, and that's also something that you're going to learn."

"It's not a sin to challenge your convictions," she said after a moment. "God gave us free will so that we might question, and the truth of God will always bring us back to Him."

"That's a healthy attitude," he nodded. "Spirits know, I had my convictions tested like hell during my Walk. So, just so you know, you're going to be tested at least in that way. The wolf will pit your religious convictions against wisdom and see what you do."

She looked less enthusiastic. "That's, well, cruel."

"Cruelty is part of life, and to understand that is part of wisdom," he told her simply. "I both hate and love my spirit, Andra. She's not a gentle or kind spirit. She is possessive, selfish, arrogant, and manipulative. She's done almost unspeakably cruel things to me in the past, and for that, I hate her. But each of those cruel acts taught me a very important lesson, and I feel I've gained wisdom because of it. She is my totem, and I follow her because she *needs* me, and I need her. Because she is my totem, I love her, at least after a fashion. I am devoted to her and her cause, and I will always

obey her. But that's me and my spirit. Your relationship with the wolf will be very different, because the wolf has a different personality. I'm not saying it'll be better, I'm not saying it'll be worse, but it will be different."

She was quiet a long moment. "What will he do?"

"I can't say, but I'd say that he's going to teach you that it's alright to have your religious convictions as long as they don't interfere with understanding the truth of things," he mused. "But don't worry too much about it, sister. I'm fairly sure that in the end, you'll be able to both hold your religious beliefs and be a proper Shaman. There's nothing stopping me from going back to the Trinity, really, outside of the fact that the Loremasters have twisted the religion to mirror their own propaganda."

"You don't believe in God?"

"I do, but that's not where I've been called to serve," he said simply. "The spirits need me, and so I serve. I don't worship the shadow fox as my god, but I do honor and revere her."

"These spirits seem like the *nephilim* from the Holy Book," she mused, mainly to herself. "The *nephilim* can be both cruel and kind, helpful and harmful, some help humanity while others test them. That sounds like the spirits, and you told me that they are part of the world that normal humans can't see. God created the world to be perfect, and if they are part of it, then I think they are part of God's design, and as such it's acceptable for me to follow them. After all, I am just following a servant of God."

"Well, there you go," he smiled. "You just passed the biggest test. And I agree with you. Spirits take the form of animals or elemental forces, representing the natural world, but there are some that look Arcan."

"Truly?"

He nodded. "Those are the spirits of Shaman who have passed away, who were so wise that the spirits brought them into the spirit world rather than allow them to move on. They are the spirits of our ancestor Shaman."

Some of them take the form of an animal when they reach the spirit world, but some prefer how they appeared in life.”

“And is that what awaits you and me? Will I be denied my place in Heaven by being a Shaman?”

“We’re human, so I really don’t know,” he said. “Besides, not *every* Shaman gets there. Only the truly wise Shaman become spirits, and for one, I know I’m nowhere near that wise. I still have much to learn.”

“As do we all, Shaman,” Ebony interrupted.

“Besides, the ancestors *chose* to become spirits, so when your time comes, Andra, I guess you’ll be given a choice. There is always choice in being a Shaman. I could walk away right now, but I won’t do it. I’m still needed, and the Shaman serve where they are needed.”

“That is a good thing,” she said, in a bit of relief.

They talked a while longer about some of the finer points of wisdom, how it differed from knowledge or intelligence, and he showed off a bit showing her his strength on a fallen log, picking up one end that would have taken two lumberjacks to pick up. They then returned to the army, where Andra rode with the other Shaman to get to know them and listen to them, while Kyven rode with Danvers and heard about what happened at Durm. Danvers tried to show him on a map, but Kyven created an illusion of the map in front and between their Equars where he added little red and blue blocks to represent the armies. Danvers rather liked his creation, and used a stick to show him what happened. “Alright, you created the hole in the breastwork here,” he pointed. “DeVaur focused his attack on that point, while the Loreguard called in their reserves to try to repair the fortifications as best they could. They were doing it under heavy artillery bombardment, however, so they failed. This Loreguard artillery position prevented them from charging the hole for nearly two hours, at least until DeVaur managed to destroy it using a flitter.”

“A *flitter*? How did he pull off that miracle?”

“The flitter rider was carrying a bomb,” Danvers said. “It was pretty damn clever, but the flitter was shot down and the rider killed. But, he got the job done. He must have trained to drop things from a moving flitter, because he landed that bomb right in the center of the cannons and blew them all to hell.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone using a flitter that way.”

“I know, it just shows that DeVaur’s a devilishly clever general,” Danvers nodded. “Anyway, once the cannons were taken out, the Loreguard tried to bring more cannons up from further east along their line,” he said, pointing to the right side of the map. “And that’s about when General Jacker of the Georvan Mountaineers hit them right here, on this ridge,” he added, pointing at a point on the Loreguard defensive lines. “They never dreamed anyone could get an army through those woods without giving themselves away. Jacker literally caught them playing dice,” he chuckled. “He had an entire brigade of Georvan mountaineers with him. They took the position and moved down the line, flanking the defenders. The Loreguard commander recalled the artillery to deal with Jacker’s breach, and that’s when DeVaur charged nearly a third of his army through the hole. He took some losses charging them up the hill, but he took their trenches because his soldiers had more alchemical weapons. Once they got within range, they overwhelmed the Loreguard defenders with shockrods and firetubes. They had the Loreguard separated into three pockets, so they wiped out the pocket in the middle, solidified their lines, then pushed the Loreguard out of their fortifications from the flanks and from behind on both sides. The battle took about a full day to wage, and when it was over, the Loreguard surrendered. DeVaur spanked them. He’s a brilliant tactician.” That coming from Danvers was no idle complement. “But he had plenty of help from you,” he added with a chuckle. “Had you not captured Beyonne and broke a hole in their lines, it would have been a much longer and bloodier battle.”

“What did they do with him?”

“There hasn’t been a real war on Noraam for nearly a hundred years, but the old rules of war are still honored. Beyonne was treated with dignity,

and in the old ways, he'll live on a Flauren plantation with a host family until the war is over. High ranking officers are always given that kind of consideration, because they'll do the honorable thing and just sit out the rest of the war. The common soldiers were all disarmed, and they'll be held for exactly thirty days before they're forced to take a vow to a Truthkeeper not to fight for the Loreguard for five years."

"A grounder can clear a Truthkeeper's Mark," Kyven grunted. "And the Loreguard have lots of grounders."

"True, but it still leaves the white mark, and if any man with that mark is caught in a uniform, he'll be summarily executed. Besides, the Loreguard's not a nation, and most Loreguard soldiers are in it for the money, not national pride. Those soldiers are from all over Noraam, the Loreguard can't really round them up all that easily. Hell, DeVaur could probably get some of them to fight for *him* if he pays them enough."

"I'm not sure I'd trust them like that."

"They're trustworthy when you put a single man in a company of Flauren regulars," Danvers chuckled. "You don't keep them together, you break them up and spread them through your army."

"Ah. That would work, I guess," Kyven said as he dismissed the illusion.

"Can you show me a map of the central territories?" Danvers asked.

"Umm, yeah, if someone gets me a paper one," he replied.

A guard fetched one from Danvers' personal wagon, and he used that to project an illusion of the southern and central Free Territories. "Alright, we're here, just about to cross into the Territories from northwestern Carin," Danvers pointed. "DeVaur's next major obstacle will be Riyan, so that's where we're headed. Clover's already plotted out a route for us to take now that we're back in her territory. We'll skirt the foothills of the mountains, swing well west of Riyan, and right about here, we'll turn east," he said, pushing his stick at a point almost directly between Riyan and Charlotte's

Town. “I want to get on the north side of the James River in case DeVaur needs us there, where we can cross the river safely and well out of sight.”

“It’s not much of a barrier. Hell, you can wade across it in most places in Riyan,” Kyven mused as he looked at the little square that represented the city on the illusory map.

“Even a little creek can be a barrier, Kyven, because DeVaur’s men will slow down and be out in the open as they wade across it,” he explained. “If the Loreguard commander there is smart, he’ll stack his forces on the north shore and use the river to slow down any attempt to cross it, stacking defenses at the most fordable points. The river’s not fordable to the east, it’s too deep, and it runs too fast to the west to make crossing it safe. Besides, DeVaur will be forced to take Riyan anyway, he can’t leave that city there and march past it, they’ll cut off his supply lines. DeVaur will be forced to attack Riyan because that’s where the river’s most easily crossed, and the Loreguard will use that to their advantage. They know where he has to go, and they’ll set up their defenses there.”

“That’s why I’m glad we’re with you, Wilson, you make this shit easy to understand,” Kyven grunted, which made Danvers laugh.

“Why thanks, Shaman,” he smiled. “Now, when you’re up to it, I’d like you to return to scouting well ahead for us.”

“It won’t be for a few days, I’m starting Andra on her education,” he answered.

“Sweet girl,” Danvers said with a smile, glancing back at where she was surrounded by the other Shaman and her personal retinue of bodyguards. “What do you think of her?”

“I think she’ll be alright,” he said. “She’s young, but she’s sincere. She’s here to stamp out slavery, and she sees being a Shaman as the perfect way to get it done.”

“She’s that serious about it?”

“As you know, slavery is the ultimate sin in their religion, and she’s devout,” he answered. “If she’s any indication of the typical Eusican, Noraam had better be glad they’re across the Angry Sea from Eusica, or they’d probably declare war on us in some kind of holy crusade against Noraam’s sin.”

“Not probably, *would*,” Danvers agreed. “Not that I wouldn’t welcome their help, but the Angry Sea is a bit too dangerous to try to sail an army across.”

“I wonder how the Loreguard got all those rifles from the Britons. They’re believers in the Eusican religion too.”

“Sometimes, money trumps religion, Kyven.”

“That’s true wisdom there, Wilson,” Kyven agreed sagely.

When they stopped for the night, Kyven again took Andra aside and had a long talk with her. He described the spirits as best he could in detail, and not just their totems. He described the way spirits interacted with the mortal world, and explained the one power she did possess, spirit sight. He meticulously explained exactly what it was and how it worked, and both the advantages and liabilities she’d have when she used it. “It’s the core of our power as Shaman, Andra,” he finished as they walked along a forest path with no lights, using spirit sight alone. “A Shaman has to see what he’s affecting, because our eyes are our windows into the spirit world. And if you lose your eyes somehow, you lose the majority of your powers. So protect your eyes at all costs. Better to lose an arm than an eye.”

“I’d never noticed this before,” she breathed, looking around. “Always before, I would just see the wolf, and then he would disappear. I was too busy looking at the wolf to look around, I suppose.”

“It’s not as easy to tell in the daytime,” he told her. “But at night, you can easily tell when you’re using your spirit sight.”

She chuckled. “So, do you *really* intend to marry me, Kyven?”

He laughed. “Afraid not, sister,” he told her. “That was just to get you away from your parents. I’m already spoken for.”

“Oh, really? Tell me about her!” she said eagerly.

He was about to say something, but he felt it almost immediately. He *felt* Danna, and he felt her within the shadow world. She had managed to shadow walk! He laughed and looked towards her. “You’re about to meet her, she’s trying to find me,” he told her. “Just don’t be surprised at what you see when she gets here.”

She all but leaped out of a converged gateway but a few seconds later, her eyes wild with fear. Kyven was already in front of it, and he caught her easily. “Holy shit!” she gasped, turning to look back as the gateway dissolved. “Kyven! I found you!”

“Dannagirl, you *did it!*” he said happily, hefting her up and pushing her into the air over his head, which made her gasp in surprise. He caught her easily, then wrapped her in his arms and kissed her on the muzzle. “Gonna throw up?”

“I might *now*,” she said archly, slapping his shoulders, which made him laugh. “But it wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be.”

“Danna, I’d like you to meet Andra D’Alaro, she’s the second human Shaman,” Kyven said as he put her down. Andra was absolutely *gaping* at Danna. “Andra, this is Danna Pannen, my girlfriend and hopefully soon to be fiancé.”

“She’s an Arcan!” Andra gasped.

“I am *not* an Arcan!” Danna protested.

Kyven chuckled. “She’s not,” he agreed. “She just looks like one at the moment. It’s tied up with the magic of this,” he said, pulling his medallion out from under his shirt, which currently held Danna’s human face. “It’s a bit complicated, but me and her trade wearing that fur. When I need the

senses and speed of an Arcan, I take the fur from her and look like an Arcan, and she becomes human again.”

“*Daios mai!*” she gasped. “Truly?”

Danna nodded. “His bitch of a spirit did this to me,” she growled. “I didn’t know she’d change me like this when I agreed to it!”

“My spirit is cunning and deceitful,” Kyven told Andra. “*Never* bargain with her and expect a fair outcome. That’s a lesson I learned the hard way, and so did Danna.”

“Damn right,” she growled.

“But forget that. I’m so proud of you, baby!” he said happily whirling her around. “You did it!”

“I’ve done it three times, just this time I tried to come to you,” she replied, a bit smugly. “But those things were like right on my ass when I found you, so no way am I going back in there for a while.”

“You’re welcome to spend the night here, I know exactly where you can stay,” he said in a husky tone, sliding his hand up her side.

“Not in front of the girl,” she protested, which made Kyven laugh. “You’re a Shaman?”

“I just found out yesterday. He came all the way to Eusica to get me!” she said, pointing at Kyven. “You can do the same?”

“I guess I could, but he has more practice. It’s the only tradeoff for *this*,” she grunted, pinching the fur on the side of her muzzle. “I have the same shadow powers he does.”

“So all Shaman have these powers?”

Kyven shook his head. “They’re special abilities based on my totem spirit,” he replied. “Danna has the essence of the shadow fox inside her, so she has their powers. Shadow foxes are monsters native to Noraam,” he explained when she looked a bit confused. “They manipulate shadows to

hide from enemies and to hunt. Danna here is an Arcan version of one, and so am I when I'm the one wearing the fur. But the powers remain, even if we're in human form. They're something of a gift."

"Nothing that cost this much is a gift," Danna grunted.

"True," he agreed. "You need to meet Nightfall and Toby, Andra."

"I met Toby and Nightfall," she said. "She looks like her, but with different colored hair," she added, pointing at Danna. "And Toby talks funny, but he's nice."

"Nightfall is a shadow fox Arcan," Kyven told her. "She's the only one in the army, not counting Toby or when I'm wearing the fur," he said, poking Danna lightly in the side and making her squirm. "Toby is like us. He's really human, but he struck a deal with the shadow fox spirit that had her change him into an Arcan temporarily. He has one of these medallions too, and it's linked to Nightfall. When he does what the shadow fox wants him to do, she'll change him back into a human."

"What's that?"

Kyven chuckled. "Make Nightfall pregnant."

"Truly?"

"Yes. My spirit *created* the shadow fox Arcans, Andra. There are only two, and both are female. Well, they need males to give them babies, and that's what Toby agreed to do. When Toby and Nightfall have babies, Toby can have the shadow fox change him back whenever he pleases."

"That seems...I don't know. Unnatural," she said. "How can Nightfall have babies to a human?"

"He's actually an Arcan at the moment, as Arcan as any Arcan out there," Kyven answered. "The shadow fox has the power to change a human into an Arcan. It's very hard for her to do, but she *can* do it. But enough talk about that," he said. "Let's head back to the camp. I'm sure everyone would love to get to know you, Danna."

“I’d like to meet General Danvers, maybe get some advice,” she said, which made him chuckle as he put his arm around her.

“Clover misses you, you know.”

“You mean she misses fighting with me.”

“That’s one way to miss you,” he grinned.

Danna caused quite a happy row in the army. She joined Danvers and the inner circle, getting to know the human General, spending half the time laughing and talking and the other half asking his advice on any number of issues they’d have when the time came to attack Avannar. She then caught up with Toby and got to know the other Shaman as they ate around the fire, and Kyven had to almost chuckle at how quickly Andra just seemed to... *belong* there, sitting right among his brothers and sisters, listening intently all the time, listening and *learning*. She really was smart.

However, Danvers pulled him aside after an officer brought him some documents, holding one of them out. “DeVaur’s requested your assistance, Shaman,” he began.

“What does he want me to do?” he asked, amused that DeVaur would actually lower himself to asking Kyven for help.

“He wants you to start studying the defenses they’re preparing at Avannar,” he replied. “I agree with his reasoning. The more we know about what we’re doing now, the better we can plan and execute an attack when we get there.”

“I’ve been keeping an eye on things.”

“Yes, I know, but he wants *maps*, Kyv,” Danvers replied. “Detailed maps of everything they’re doing. He also wants you to search for their black crystal weapons and find out how many they have. It’s *Avannar*, Kyv, there’s no doubt there’s quite a few death machines of various designs in the city. After all, the Loreguard’s main armory is in the city.”

“That’s true,” he agreed.

“His idea is only sensible,” Danvers added. “Now, what *I* would like you to do is see if you can capture anything that we can carry easily but would help us,” he added. “You said you learned how to pull things into the shadow world. If you come across any repellers or such, why don’t you bring them back to us? As long as it’s something we can carry. You know how we operate.”

Kyven nodded. “Vasha and Strider can pull something if it’s too big,” he reasoned. “They’re up to it, though they’ll both be pissed off at us for a while.”

Danvers laughed. “I’m not that brave,” he grinned.

“Alright, I can start tonight. I need to visit Greggson anyway, make sure he hasn’t forgotten about me.”

“I’d be careful around him, Shaman,” Danvers said. “You said it yourself, he’s a zealot. There’s no telling what he’ll do now that he sees that Avannar is doomed.”

“He’s already come close to deciding to kill me twice,” Kyven agreed. “I fully expect him to try to kill me when he thinks he can’t get anything else out of me.” He scratched his chin. “I might drop in on Alak while I’m running around, see how the Cariners came out of it.”

“I’d be careful of him as well.”

“Eh, I *like* Alak,” he chuckled. “Half the reason I want to go is to just sit and share a glass of wine with him. He has *excellent* wine.”

“Well, bring me back what’s left in the bottle,” Danvers chuckled.

“I’ll have to give it to Danna, or she’ll kill me for not being with *her* when she came all the way out here to see me,” he noted.

“Point,” Danvers agreed with a smile.

Holy *shit*.

Kyven had never done what Danvers suggested, investigate the armory and see what the Loreguard on hand, and in a way, it's a good thing he didn't, else he'd never have got himself into this in the first place.

They had *warehouses* full of large-scale alchemical weapons. Flame projectors, shockbombardiers, concussion cannons, siege pounders, all of the kinds of weapons that were so big and cumbersome that moving them around was an undertaking. Had the war not come on them so suddenly, these weapons would have been on the way south, pulled by teams of ten to twenty mules or oxen each, and each one would have been worth ten artillery cannons. A shockbombardier by itself could lay waste to a large area.

And those were just the *normal* weapons. The Loreguard did indeed have several dozen large scale black crystal weapons, but they also had *tons* of smaller ones, meant to be used by just one or two men. He came across nearly an entire storeroom filled with that device that the Loremaster had used so long ago on Aven, which had annihilated everything organic within its area of effect. Kyven had no idea that was a black crystal weapon, but here they were, all lined up and already loaded, black crystal chips already placed in them, letting a single man twist, throw, and kill several dozen men if he had good aim...and only damage the muskets in destroying their wooden stocks, which could be easily replaced. He found a storeroom filled with black crystal shot, made of tiny slivers and chips of black crystal implanted in special alchemist-made pistol and musket balls, ensuring that one hit would kill...much like the one that Danna had used on Scar a couple of years ago, back when they captured her.

And Kyven wanted the Flauren army weakened before it got here...if he'd seen all *this*, he'd never have done that. But, it wasn't a complete waste, because now that he knew it was there, he could do something about it.

It was so nice of the Loreguard to make all those weapons, which would now be used against them.

It took him only about an hour to stalk around in his Arcan form, using a variety of illusions to get past soldiers and what few civilians remained, shadow walking from time to time to get higher vantage points or look into heavily guarded buildings, and he started taking a tally of the large-scale black crystal death machines the Loreguard had on hand. They had quite a few of them, but again, now that he knew about them, disabling them wouldn't be all that terribly difficult.

But one thing was for sure. Kyven saw that a raid on the Loreguard and Loremaster crystal stockpiles was in order. If they didn't have replacement crystals for those large-scale machines, they wouldn't be too effective. Large-scale weapons like that used crystals like mad, as in some guy shoveling buckets full of crystals into the power chamber to power the devices for each use.

After that, he used one of three maps of Avannar that Danvers had dug up for him to annotate all the defensive preparations. One map was the south shore, New Avannar, one was a map of the Loremasters' island, and the third was the north shore, Old Avannar. He saw already that the Loremasters were ready to concede the southern parts of the city, the trades and craftsmen's districts, where most of the commoners lived. That part of the city wasn't surrounded by a wall, the newer part of Avannar, and the Loreguard felt it wasn't worth trying to hold.

It looked almost nothing like what he remembered. At nearly every intersection, houses had been pulled down to block the streets, and while the bridge to the north bank was intact so far, both bridges to the Loremasters' headquarters had been dismantled, isolating the island. Odds were, they'd also take down the bridge across to Old Avannar, and use the river as their major obstacle, for it was nearly five hundred rods across and deep. It was crossable to the west, upriver of the falls, but that meant that one would have to deal with the wall.

The wall itself was a creation of alchemy, he realized after walking the battlements. It had been alchemically treated over the centuries to make the walls stronger than steel, so they could resist cannon fire and alchemical

siege weapons. Cannons usually brought walls down easily, but cannonballs would just bounce off the old walls of Avannar, and a groundpounder wouldn't shake the wall off its foundation. The walls were going to be a very serious obstacle for any army...like the Mallan army, whose campfires were visible from the wall off to the north. They were sitting up there waiting, waiting for the northernmost armies to arrive, and probably also waiting for DeVaur. Kyven had no doubt that the kingdoms were communicating, and they were coordinating.

A flitter passed overhead. The pilot couldn't see him since he was merged to the shadows, but the flitter told him that the Loreguard were not being passive. They were sending it out to scout, what flitters were mainly built to do. The Loreguard was keeping a close eye on the Mallans, watching for any sign of an attack, when they'd use all the weapons they had nestled into and behind the walls. Cannons, artillery, several alchemical weapons, and six separate death machines, arrayed along the walls facing the Mallans.

Nightfall stepped out of the shadows just behind him and immediately dropped to all fours, coming up beside him. She couldn't see him any more than the humans could, but she could sense his shadows, and in that way, she knew exactly where he was. "Danna is waiting for you to come back," she whispered. "How do things look?"

"Unpleasant," he replied, kneeling down. "The Loreguard must have pulled every large-scale alchemical weapon they had and recalled them to Avannar. They're armed to the teeth. It's going to take *us* to get the armies past these walls," he told her grimly. "You, me, Toby, hell, probably even Umbra and Danna."

"How so?"

"I'll have to teach you," he grunted. "I can pull their weapons into the shadow world from *within* the shadow world. If the five of us make a few rounds and steal a couple dozen of their heaviest weapons, we'll even the odds."

“Can Umbra shadow walk?” she whispered.

“I don’t know, but I doubt it. She’s not *that* curious about her powers. I might have to try to teach her...if I can. I’m not sure how I’d do it, though,” he grunted.

“Did you finish the map that Danvers wanted?”

“Almost. Here, you can take this one to him,” he said, handing her one of the tightly folded maps he had with him, which he’d been carrying tightly held in his hands so they weren’t seen, enveloping them with himself to make them disappear with the rest of him. “It’s everything south of the river. I’m still assessing things over here.”

“Alright. You were right about the things in the shadow world. They stay well away from us now, almost as if they fear us.”

“They’re not afraid of us in the slightest, Nightfall,” Kyven warned. “They’re not stupid. They’re just pulling back to observe us, figure a way around my new trick, and that’s *it*. As soon as they think they can catch one of us, they’ll be back at it.”

“I know,” she agreed, leaning over and licking his cheek. “I’ll go take this to Wilson. Good luck, Kyven.”

“Be careful in there,” he warned again.

“Always,” she replied, turning and stepping into a converged gateway.

It took him nearly three more hours to finish the assessment, as he prowled near and sometimes among Loreguard patrolling the city and the walls. In all, he didn’t like what he saw, and he knew that it was going to take both the shadow fox Arcans and the Shaman to breach Avannar, at least if he didn’t want a slaughter of monumental proportions to happen here...and he didn’t. He didn’t want to see the armies wipe each other out, he just wanted them to be *equal* after all was said and done, so no one kingdom could roll over the others. As long as they were fighting each other over who was going to capture the mining villages after the fall of Avannar,

it would give the Arcans time to retreat back to the mountains and prepare for their arrival.

Prepare for their betrayal.

Instead of going straight back, he dropped the maps off in Danvers' tent by thrusting them out of the shadow world, then he went back to Avannar, aware that the *things* were stalking him without getting anywhere near him. If they were stalking Nightfall as well, but *hadn't* stalked Danna, then that meant that they could differentiate, could tell them apart. For some reason, they feared Nightfall for the moment, but they *didn't* fear Danna... that was curious.

He'd have to think about that.

Greggson was sleeping in his office when Kyven stepped out of the shadows, in his Arcan form and not even bothering with an illusion. They'd moved a fairly nice bed into the office for him, and a look around with spirit sight showed him that quite a few others were doing the same. They weren't even leaving the headquarters now. Kyven looked around for anything alchemical, and outside of the lamp, two talkers, an air cooler, a shockrod, and a black crystal chip in his desk drawer, probably loaded into a pistol, there was nothing close to Greggson's bed to use to threaten him.

"Well, that's new," Kyven said idly, which made Greggson snap up to a seated position in his bed in a heartbeat. Kyven channeled a faint ghostly light in the air over them, and let Greggson see him sitting on his haunches on top of Greggson's desk. "Like the look? I was feeling a bit nostalgic, so I decided to run around as the black fox Shaman again. I always did like this," he murmured, touching the white fur on his chest absently. "It's one of my greatest creations."

"What do *you* want?" he demanded.

"Just checking in. I didn't want you to forget me," he said with a toothy grin. "That and seeing if you want to leave yet. Things are starting to get hot, and I thought you might be ready to go."

“I will not! Not yet,” he amended.

“Well, alright,” he said. “Since you’re willing to stick it out, I might have some instructions for you in a few days. I’m waiting for things to settle down in Carin, see how things develop. DeVaur...shit,” he chuckled. “That man’s a lot smarter than I thought he was.”

“I saw the reports, *you* helped him.”

“Yeah, I kinda had to,” he chuckled. “I didn’t think he’d get through your army that fast given what I did to help. But DeVaur, damn, I’m gonna have to be more careful next time,” he said lightly. “They’re marching on Riyan right now. They rounded up your army there in Durm and made them vow to a Truthkeeper, so those soldiers are out of it. Did you send those men to Stinger Bay?”

“Some, but not all,” he replied. “They’ve been sending men down the Podac to where the seafaring vessels can moor, down at Delmara, bringing up arms and equipment shipped from Briton. They pulled some of the men I ordered to Stinger Bay to go up to help.”

“Yeah, I saw some of it, those short rifles. They’re pretty rugged,” Kyven nodded. “It must have cost you your collective first born to get them.”

“They weren’t cheap, that’s for sure,” Greggson grunted, acting almost, well, *casual*. “They’ve got more coming in, artillery this time. Supposedly, the Briton cannons have more range and power than anything we use.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Kyven nodded. “Were they going to send them to Riyan?”

He shook his head. “Here. They were going to send some of our older artillery to Riyan, using the canal.”

The canal was a marvel of Noraavi engineering. Built two hundred years ago, it was a canal that linked Mansa to Riyan, and Mansa was only about thirty minars southwest of Avannar. It was a canal built to follow a

series of valleys and natural plains, and was bored right through the hills when they ran out of valley to use, forming tunnels. The canal ran for nearly eighty minars, and used barges that were hauled by teams of oxen or mules from the shoreline. It was used mainly to transport grains and tobacco from Riyan up to Mansa, and then on to Avannar, using the barges to allow them to move a large amount quickly. There had always been talk of extending the canal up to Avannar, but the engineers back then and today said that it wouldn't be a good idea, for some scientific reason dealing with the Podac River. Mansa was as far north as they would let the canal run, but that was close enough to get a huge amount of goods from Riyan to Avannar in just a couple of days. Some merchants couldn't afford the fees involved with the canal, however, so they transported their goods by wagon.

Odds were, that was how the Loreguard was going to move the army at Riyan, stack them on barges and send them up to Mansa. Boats couldn't make it to Riyan from the Angry Sea, since the James river wasn't navigable once one was twenty minars upriver, that was where the first fordable area was, shallow enough to wade across. Instead of setting up a system of portages, they just had a road running from Riyan to the town at the ford, which they called Jamestown in honor of the same man from ancient times for whom the river was named.

"So I was wrong, the Loreguard is going to make a stand at Riyan. I thought they'd sacrifice Riyan and come straight back here."

"Not a stand, a delaying action," Greggson yawned. "They're just there to slow the Flaurens down. They have orders to retreat to Avannar if the Flaurens get across the river."

"Clever. But then again, I've noted that quite a few Loreguard generals are quite clever," he said appreciatively.

"I guess they wouldn't be generals if they were stupid," Greggson grunted, yawning again.

"You'd be surprised," Kyven chuckled. "Well, I'll let you get some sleep. I'll be back in a few days to check on you. Until then, be careful and

be safe, Councillar.”

Back within the shadow world, he sat down on his haunches and pondered things, both to observe the *things* and think things through. If Greggson was right and Riyan was just an operation to stall DeVaur, then he was right in that the Loremasters were putting everything at Avannar. Riyan would be a major obstacle because of the river, and if the Loreguard did it right, they could bog DeVaur down while using only a tenth of the troops that DeVaur had, allowing the Loreguard to evacuate the rest of what forces they had left in the southern Free Territories to Avannar, to aid in its defense.

And that defense would be *stiff*. Kyven was going to need Nightfall and Toby for sure, and maybe also Danna and Umbra to chip away at those defenses, and that meant that they had to spend extended amounts of time in the shadow world...which wasn't safe, not even for him. Clearly, this was a problem that had to be fixed.

The shadow fox had told him long ago that his knowledge and understanding of the shadow world would be his greatest protection from the *things*, and since they were currently wary of trying to attack him, well, he guessed it was the best opportunity he had to really look around.

The first thing he did was apply wisdom to the issue. If he needed to understand this place, then the first place to start was right where he was. He looked around slowly, carefully, keeping only a little attention on the *things*, seeing the shadow world. It was dark, murky, shifting and, well, shadowy. The real world was visible from the shadow world, but it was indistinct, hazy, wavering, and it changed depending on the shadows that appeared and disappeared there. There was no up or down here, part of what incited the vertigo, and he knew that he could walk up or down as easily as he could forward or backwards.

Alright, so, everything looked the same to him. He didn't see or sense anything new or different by observing the shadow world while at rest, so he observed it while in motion. He used his will to force himself to move as

he walked, watching the shadow world, trying to *sense* it, trying to feel what the *things* felt when he changed the dimensions of this world, that thing that drew them right to him. He could feel the change of the world, feel it pull and contract and tug like taffy as he used his will against it—

But he never felt that when the *things* moved. He sensed them because they were shadow, and he was attuned to shadow. That ability to sense shadows was also what allowed him to find people from within the shadow world even from great distances, sensing *their* shadows within this place and using it like a lighthouse to guide him.

Alright, that was something new. The *things* used some other means of travel here, which allowed them to move even faster than he could. This was their natural habitat, after all, so it stood to reason that they'd learned a means of moving that didn't involve wholesale alteration of the shadow world to accomplish. So, the question was, exactly how *did* the *things* move here? That was a question worth pondering, at least some other time.

After walking halfway to Haven and feeling the *things* stalking him, staying well out of his sight but keeping close by enough to be able to rapidly close the distance, he stopped, sat down, and pondered again. Alright, he knew he was onto something when he started to consider the *things*. After all, they were part of this world, and knowledge of this world would be his greatest defense...so it was only logical that learning more about the *things* was also important. Know thy enemy and whatnot. He picked the closest one and started moving towards it, but that caused it to retreat from him. He tried again with a different one, and that one as well retreated from him, even as the others kept that optimal distance and kept him all but surrounded.

He sat down again, pondering...then he had something of an idea. It was fairly simple, actually. One of his strongest defenses in the real world was to turn all but invisible when he was in the shadows, hiding from the senses of his enemy. Clearly, if he could pull the same trick here, he could either sneak up on the *things* or avoid them.

He first tried melding to the shadows of the shadow world, but found that it didn't really work here. He was an alien thing here, and he stood out like a pile of coal in a ballroom. Not even melding to the shadows made a difference in that, because the shadows couldn't hide him. He was like a glaring beacon in the shadow world.

Well, if he was that alien, then he needed to *be* the shadow.

It was like everything suddenly changed. He brought the essence of shadow into himself and changed his body, taking on his shadow form, and it was like the entire shadow world *changed*. It suddenly became far less murky and shifting, seemed to snap right into balance. The vertigo-inducing movement of the shadows around him ceased, and his surroundings both in the shadow world and the real world became much more clear, more focused. Suddenly, he could *see* the things in the distance, saw them in their natural forms, which were surprisingly humanoid in shape, but still lacking depth, like two dimensional beings imprinted on a three dimensional world.

Holy *shit*! Their real world bodies had much more of an effect on the shadow world than he ever dreamed! By becoming the shadow, by taking on a body aligned to *this* world, it removed the effect he had on the shadow world!

But, while he had a shadow body, he still found that he couldn't move without enacting his will against the shadow world. He took a single step, and he immediately saw things turn murky again. That meant that it was them *affecting* the shadow world that made it so nauseating, and just them being there had a powerful effect on this place, he'd already learned. He also saw the confusion in the *things*. They felt that, but they could no longer see him, no longer sense him. They moved uncertainly in the direction they felt the alteration of the shadows, but they did *not* come directly at him. He moved towards the closest one and could almost sense its confusion, for it could feel the distortion moving towards it, but couldn't see *him*.

He stopped and forced his will on the shadow world, creating a moving distortion that quickly moved off, as if he were taking giant steps, and the

things responded to it, hurrying off after him. They all left, left him totally alone.

He had to laugh, and laugh almost maniacally. *That* was the answer! That was what the shadow fox was hinting at! By using the aspects of the shadow world in his favor, he could both hide from the *things* and decoy them away! And in time, as they learned it was nothing but a trick, simply creating *two* possible paths for them to follow any time he moved would forever make them uncertain about exactly where he was! The only indicator they'd have would be gateways converged back into the real world, but by then, it would be far too late. Not even the *things* could move *that* fast, to catch one of them as they were leaving.

She had been right. Understanding this world was his greatest defense. He had learned today, learned a great deal, both in how to evade the *things* and also in how to make moving around within the shadow world much less nauseating.

He returned to the army, feeling the *things* uncertain as to if his distortion was real or not, confused by his decoy, then converged a gateway back into the real world. The army was sleeping, only the guards moving about, all the Shaman also asleep in their tents near the main pavilion tent that was Danvers'. Danna, however, was still awake, sitting by the dwindling fire in front of the Shaman tents, in her human form since he was wearing the fur, sitting almost demurely on the ground with her legs tucked under her, poking at the coals with a stick. She gave him a bright smile as he stepped into the firelight, and he wasted no time sitting beside her and licking her cheek. She chuckled and put her arm around him. "All done?"

"More or less," he replied, doing the same and being mindful of his claws. "I learned something *big* today."

"What?"

"I learned how to move through the shadow world much, much more safely," he replied. "Since I made the *things* afraid to attack, it gave me time to really study the shadow world, and I figured a few things out."

“Well, I’m all ears, love,” she said with a bright smile.

“You have something else to learn first,” he told her, then he explained what he’d learned to her in great detail, taking nearly two hours to describe everything he sensed and felt, described how the *things* reacted, and how taking on his shadow form within the shadow world made it much less vertigo-inducing.

“So, it sounds like I need to figure out how you do that,” she said after he finished, as the guards changed shifts at midnight.

“As quickly as you can, so that’s what you need to work on from now on, until you get it,” he replied. “I might need your help when it comes time to attack Avannar, so you need to be ready.” He reached up and touched his medallion. “Ready to change back? I’d better not spend too much time like this, I may need the shape tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess,” she sighed.

“Just be patient, love, I’m working on it,” he chuckled. “I’m not getting very far, but I *am* working on it.”

“I’ll be glad when you do,” she grunted as they both changed. Kyven returned to his human form, and Danna took on the fur and became the Arcan. “I’m starting to get used to this, but I still want to change back for good.”

“It has its moments,” he told her as he pulled her against him, then kissed her muzzle. “But I don’t care what you look like. It’s the woman inside that I love.”

“I do believe that you mean that,” she said, licking his cheek playfully.

“Now, since I can take you back safely in the morning, why don’t you stay the rest of the night?”

“That was kinda what was on my mind when I came over here,” she admitted with a husky undertone, nipping at his ear lightly.

“And here I wasted half the night by doing work. Silly me,” he noted, which made her laugh as he picked them both up off the ground and led her towards his tent by the hand.

After escorting Danna back to her own army just before dawn, Kyven rode with Nightfall and Toby and made an entire morning out of explaining things to them. Danvers wanted him to scout ahead, but this was much more important, and besides, it gave him the chance to ride Vasha. As usual, they rode with Danvers and the other Shaman walking or riding with them, which was a bit rough for Kyven and Danvers. Vasha and Strider had started playing like colts over the last couple of days, and they didn’t see carrying riders as an impediment to their recreation.

He was just as detailed with them as he was with Danna. He took nearly three hours explaining what he’d learned in great detail, every aspect of it, then stressed in no uncertain terms that learning how to take on the shadow form was *far* more important to them now than learning how to shadow walk. “Both of you need to learn how to do it as quickly as possible. Once you figure that out, *then* you can work on shadow walking, because it won’t even be half as dangerous.”

“But there’s still danger,” Nightfall noted.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “The *things* might start getting wise to it after a while, so we have to exploit this window of opportunity. If the three of us can stay in the shadow world for hours at a time come when we attack Avannar, well, we can do some major damage. At least after I teach you guys how to reach into the real world and pull things into the shadow world, anyway.”

“Like what you did with Beyonne?” Dancer asked.

Kyven nodded. “But more for going after their death machines,” he replied. “If we can steal those, then not only do we keep them from being used against us, *we* can use them against *them*.”

“It’s too bad that not all Shaman can do that,” Andra noted.

“My shadow powers have nothing to do with me being a Shaman,” Kyven reminded her. “They’re what you might call something left over from when I was an Arcan. Actually, my shadow powers are the main reason the Loreguard take me so seriously,” he chuckled. “If I only had my illusions, I wouldn’t be even half as effective.”

“Well, I’d take someone seriously too if they could move across the entire continent in a matter of minutes,” Patience smiled lightly.

“I have to say, Kyv, if you can steal their death machines, it will make a *huge* difference,” Danvers agreed.

“That reminds me, I picked up some information from Greggson last night about Riyan. I really need to talk to him when he’s sleepy, he’s much more talkative,” he chuckled. “They don’t intend to stand and hold at Riyan, they’re only going to hold their position as long as they can to slow the southern armies down. DeVaur will certainly need to know.”

That afternoon he again talked with Andra, walking around the camp with her after they stopped for the evening, introducing her to his spirit in a roundabout way, since she was sitting there waiting on him when they came around a cluster of tents. Her presence incited Andra’s spirit sight, and she gasped and gawked at the shadow fox as she sat sedately, her tail wrapped around her legs, her emerald eyes glowing with a calm radiance. It was that pose he had seen her use most of his life, a picture of calm patience, as if she could outwait time itself. “Sister,” he said with a solemn nod, not letting his true emotions show in front of Andra. The others may know how he felt about his spirit, but he wasn’t going to openly disrespect her in public. They kept their wrangling private.

The white wolf seemed to materialize out of the evening haze, coming into being as he walked towards them, going past the shadow fox and coming up to Andra. He sat down before her as she looked at him, with curiosity more than fear, then he bowed his head once.

“Reach out and touch him, Andra. He wants to speak to you. You must touch him to hear his words.”

She glanced at Kyven, then did as he commanded, reaching out and putting her hand on the big wolf’s shoulder. *“Know that we are well pleased with you, child,”* the wolf informed her, but doing it audibly, so he could hear it. *“You have learned what you needed to learn quickly, and what is more, you have shown wisdom in reconciling your religious beliefs with the necessities about to be forced upon you. You have demonstrated that you have the wisdom and maturity to begin your Walk. You are ready to begin your training. Kyven of the shadow fox.”*

“Yes, brother wolf?”

“This night, take her to Vanguard. Sister Rainsong will begin her physical training in the morning. There is little time, and she must be ready. She has pleased me with what she has learned, but she still has much more to learn before she may walk among you as an equal.”

“It will be as you wish, brother wolf,” he said with a nod.

“Congratulations, sister,” he told her with a smile.

“Thank you, Kyven,” she replied with a bright smile. “I hope I’m ready.”

“You’re not going to like it,” he winked. “When I did it, I thought I was going to die on a daily basis. You have to work yourself beyond exhaustion every day, because the magic that Rainsong will use will make you recover stronger and stronger the more you tire yourself out. In a matter of weeks, if you really work hard, you’ll complete your physical training and start learning the wisdom that brother wolf wants to teach you.”

“Then I begin to learn magic?”

“A little at a time,” he nodded. “Brother wolf will teach it to you little by little. When he teaches you new magic, then you’ve pleased him and have done well. Think of the spells he teaches as rewards for hard work and wise decisions.” He chuckled. “And don’t fret if you don’t learn much,

sister. We're humans, Shaman magic is extremely difficult for us to do. Most spells the others use would kill me if I tried to use them. I only know a handful of spells, but those spells I know, I know well. They get me by."

"Well, as long as I learn enough to help, I'll be happy," she replied. "It's why I'm here, to help end the evil bondage of the Arcans, which is against God. I just want to help."

"You'll do fine, Andra," he said gently, patting her shoulder. "Now, let's go back and pack up your tent and let you say goodbye to the others, and I'll take you to Vanguard. You're going to be *very* busy in the morning."

"I'm a little scared, but I'm really excited."

"That's a healthy outlook," he said, nodding to the two spirits. "Brother, sister."

"Thank you, brother wolf," she said hesitantly, reaching out and putting her hand on his shoulder again. He surprised her by rubbing against her side, almost like a cat, which both startled her and made her laugh. He bounded off towards the trees, vanishing from sight.

"Wolves are playful, Andra," Kyven told her with a smile. "Expect it."

"Are shadow foxes playful, Kyven?"

"Their kind of play isn't what most people would find amusing," he said with a dark smile. "But yes. In their own way, they play."

The shadow fox just gave him an amused look, then the shadows rose up and claimed her.

The others were quite surprised when they found out that Andra was starting her training, but they were quite happy for her. Dancer and Patience especially hovered around her like protective mothers, giving her all kinds of advice as they helped her pack her tent, warning her that winter came early in the far north and that she should have them prepare her winter clothes quickly. Andra hugged and kissed her way through the Shaman and

the Arcans that had been tasked to watch over her, hugged Toby and Nightfall goodbye, got a big kiss from Danvers, then she turned and took the rope Kyven offered her. “I hope I don’t throw up again,” she said, flushing slightly.

“It’s not for the weak-stomached, that’s for sure,” Dancer laughed, giving Patience a look.

“Oh hush, you threw up too,” she replied primly.

“True, but you threw up *first*,” she dug, which made Patience slap her on the shoulder.

“You’ll be alright, it’s not as far to Vanguard as it was when we came here from Eusica,” Kyven told her as she tied the rope around her slender waist.

“I’ll be gone for a while, Wilson. I didn’t get a chance to see Alak last night, so I’m going to drop by Rallan on my way back.”

“Alright, Kyv. We’ll keep the fire going for you.”

Andra managed her second trip through the shadow world much better than the first. When they got to Vanguard, she only looked a little pale and peaked, but didn’t immediately bend over and throw up like she did when they traveled from her village. He gave her a moment to get her stomach back under control, then they walked down into Vanguard. It was still just before sunset there, again proving that the sun did indeed move around the world, and the diminutive little Rainsong hurried out to meet them as they came down into the green, surrounded by excited children. “Sister, this is Andra,” Kyven introduced.

“I’m so happy to meet you, sister!” she said eagerly, giving the startled young woman a hug. “To know that there are more human Shaman makes me very happy!”

“Why is that?” Andra asked.

“Because it means that the humans are joining the rest of the world in harmony with the spirits,” she replied immediately. “It means that soon, maybe within my lifetime, the wisdom of the spirits will find its way into human hearts. That will be a wonderful day.”

“Andra, it’s important that you obey Rainsong like she was every parent, aunt, uncle, mayor, prince, and king you ever heard of all wrapped up in one,” Kyven told her. “Sometimes what she’ll tell you to do won’t make sense, but you need to do it anyway. Trust her, she knows what she’s doing.”

“I will,” Andra nodded, then she hugged Kyven. “Thank you, Kyven. For bringing me here, for giving me a chance to do what is right by God’s mercy.”

“No problem, sister,” he said, patting her shoulder.

“And they’re wrong, you’re not scary at all,” she told him.

“You’ve only seen my good side, Andra,” he chuckled. “You’ve never seen the other side of me, and you don’t *want* to see it,” he winked.

He kissed her cheek and pushed her to Rainsong gently, who put her arm around her and led her towards the village, then he felt the shadow fox emerge from the shadows beside him. He glanced down and saw her sitting beside him, tail wrapped around her legs, so he knelt down and put his hand on her back.

I am so proud of you I don’t know what to do with myself, she told him, a bit giddy. *You have learned one of the great secrets of the shadow world, my Shaman.*

“Well, when I had time to actually stay in there and study it, observe it without having to run for my life, it just seemed to fit together,” he said modestly. “And as soon as the others learn how to take on the shadow form, they’ll be much safer.”

Yes, but know also that there is more to learn. You have unlocked one secret. There are others, and I would have you learn them all. No Shaman of mine is ever content with what he knows, but always seeks to know more.

“I’ll keep at it. Your teachings served me well, sister. They led me to the secret.”

As it should be, she replied, a bit teasingly. Now, on to matters. Nightfall is pregnant.

“Already? I guess Toby didn’t mess around,” Kyven laughed.

I would have you bring her to Haven, where she will be safe.

“I can do that, but I was kinda hoping she could help with Avannar.”

She can shadow walk, my Shaman. I don’t think she’ll be staying in Haven very much.

He chuckled. “No, she can be quite willful when she wants to be,” he agreed. “Has Toby decided what he wants to do?”

He wishes to retain his Arcan form until the battle in Avannar is complete. He knows you will need his help. After he is returned to his human form, I would make a slight alteration to the magic that binds you and Danna together; allow you and her to change independently of one another, at least for short periods of time. That way, both of you can hold the Arcan shape when it is needful. But Danna will still be an Arcan, and you will still be a human, she added with a slightly mischievous look. I will not let go of her until she gives me what I want.

“You know, I was thinking,” he mused. “If we’re always different, just how was she supposed to get pregnant?”

You believe that that makes a difference? she asked with a sly look at him. All that matters is that your seed reaches her eggs. What happens afterwards is not your concern, at least until your kits are born.

“Speaking of kits, how is Umbra?”

Getting fat, ungainly, and short tempered, she replied, which made him laugh. *She will be delivering at the end of summer.*

“That’s just a few weeks away,” Kyven mused. “Half the reason everyone’s rushing is so they can get all the fighting done and dig in before the first snows.”

The leaves are already starting to turn to the north of Haven, she informed him. *Umbra carries a girl and two boys, and they are maturing at a quite normal rate. They will be fine kits.*

“My children,” he breathed, a little intimidated and quite overjoyed at the sound of it. “I can’t wait to see them.”

Even though they are Arcan?

“That makes absolutely no difference to me,” he replied immediately and with a little heat.

Then you should bow to the inevitable and give me Danna’s Seal, she told him lightly. *Then you would have more children to be proud of.*

“You just let me worry about that,” he replied easily, patting her back. “I’m going to find a way to beat you, sister. Mark my words.”

Optimism is an admirable quality, she intoned with dry aplomb. *Now, you have tasks to perform. See to them.*

“Yes, sister,” he replied, standing up. He gave Rainsong and Andra a final wave when they reached the door to the inn, then he turned and vanished into the shadows as efficiently as his totem.

He had quite a shopping list of things to do that night, but fortunately, all of them but one were in the same place.

The first thing he did was drop in on Alak Longwell. He observed from the shadow world as he and Sheldra ate dinner in his private apartment, and after the maid came in to clear the dishes, he decided he’d better crash their

party before they became indisposed. Alak had Sheldra's bodice halfway unlaced by the time either of them took notice of him, sitting calmly at the little table near the royal bed, feet propped up and a glass of wine swirling in his hand. Sheldra gave a startled call that surprised Alak, who whirled around with a tiny little pistol in his hand, no doubt hidden somewhere upon his person. The guards stationed outside were also attentive, for both of them barreled through the door upon Sheldra's gasping cry.

Clearly, Alak was far more nervous and far smarter than Kyven expected.

"You need to find some way to announce yourself," he said, a tiny bit shortly, waving the guards back outside.

"Where's the fun in that?" Kyven asked with a mischievous smile, pouring another glass of wine. "I came to see how your people fared afterwards. Did your army come through intact?"

"Mostly. They weren't in the actual fighting because the Loreguard weren't entirely trusting of them. Afterwards, they were forced to vow to a Truthkeeper, but the vow was to not fight for the Loreguard or the Loremasters," he chuckled. "There was nothing in the vow preventing them from being patriots for Carin."

"Well, that's good for Carin. The question is, what do you intend to do with them?"

"Do? Shaman, Carin doesn't *do* with her army," he replied simply. "We're a small kingdom that minds its own business. My troops will be securing our borders, and that's it." He took the glass of wine. "But what concerns me is Foggy Peak."

"I figured it might," Kyven said easily. "It's still being occupied by a sizable Arcan force."

"Why are they there?"

“To seal off the southern pass through the Smoke Mountains,” he answered honestly. “It’s not much of a pass, but it’s a pass that an army might conceivably move wagons through, so they’re sealing it. They’ll be in Foggy Peak for maybe ten more days, then they’re going to pull back into the mountains. Just tell your citizens to be patient. Hell, they can go back now if they want, the Arcans won’t stop them, and they’ll find all their houses untouched. They’re not there to loot and pillage, they’re just there to hold the village until they know where they’re going to set up in the mountains. Then they’ll pull back. As long as you don’t try to march into the mountains, Alak, you’ll be just fine. But I suggest in the strongest possible terms you *do not* do that. They’ll attack you.”

“So, now we become enemies?” he asked simply, taking a sip of wine.

“That’s going to depend on you,” Kyven replied. “I’ve already told you exactly what we’re doing and why. I know you don’t like it, and your plantation owners *really* don’t like it, but times are changing. In five years, when the crystals in the Arcan collars start to fail and there’s no replacements, we’d have come to this point anyway. The Arcans *will* be free, Alak. Nothing you can do is going to stop that. But what you *can* do is prepare for it and make the blow as soft as possible.”

“You’re talking about them dragging me out of this palace and lynching me.”

“I don’t think it’ll be quite that bad,” he said seriously. “But, if you want some advice on how to handle it, I think we could think up a few things.”

“What do you mean?”

He finished pouring a second glass and offered it to Sheldra, who had finished lacing her bodice back up. “Think about it a minute, Alak. What’s going to happen when the collars fail?”

“Arcans are going to escape, in huge numbers,” he reasoned. “They’ll be only be a few at first, but then more and more are going to escape.

Eventually the owners will have to resort to cages and chains to hold them, with men with muskets patrolling the fields to keep them on the plantations.”

“Which won’t work very well,” Kyven said simply. “It’ll be even harder when the Masked start unlocking those cages at night and helping the Arcans escape.”

“That’s an act of war,” Alak said darkly.

Kyven shrugged. “The Arcans of Haven consider holding their brothers and sisters in bondage to be an act of war, Alak. Who has the moral high ground?”

“We do,” Sheldra said simply. “The law, it states that Arcans are property.”

“*Your* law,” Kyven pointed out. “Haven has its own set of laws. Curiously enough, humans have the same rights in Haven as the Arcans do with one exception,” he chuckled. “That’s a curious thing for former slaves to do. But anyway, Carin law isn’t going to really matter very much here. I told Alak the last time I was here that the Arcans aren’t going to rest until *all* Arcans are free. You can deny it and see your kingdom fall into chaos, or you can accept it as inevitable and plan for what happens afterward. One way or another, in ten years, there won’t be an Arcan left east of the Smoke Mountains. Haven intends to take *all* of them west and separate the races for a while, until humans can accept that Arcans aren’t inferior to them. When they do that, you’ll have to run a kingdom that no longer has its slave labor, Alak. What are you going to do?”

“I just can’t accept that,” Alak said stubbornly. “The Arcans don’t have the power or the organization to pull something like that off.”

Kyven put his glass down. “Actually, I think it’s about time for you to see something, Alak. I’ll *show* you. I’ll take you to Haven and I’ll *show* you. If you’re up to it, anyway. The way I travel is very hard on a man’s stomach.”

Alak and Sheldra traded glances, then he set his glass down. "I would like to see it," he declared. "Dear heart, would you wait here for us?"

"Wait? I will not *wait*," she snorted. "I will go."

"It's going to be unpleasant, Sheldra," Kyven warned. "The way I travel is like being sick at your stomach."

"My stomach, it is strong," she shrugged. "I will see this Haven for myself."

"Warn your guards, we might be gone an hour or so," Kyven said. "Oh, and we'll need some rope."

"Rope? For what?"

"So you don't get lost in the shadow world," he replied. "We tie ourselves together at the waist. That way I don't lose one of you."

The guards were puzzled over Alak's request for rope, but they brought more than enough for Kyven to secure himself to his passengers. "Alright, where we're going will be like a dream world," he warned them. "You won't be able to see very far, and everything will shift and move. There won't be any up or down, and it'll make you queasy. We're going to walk about ten steps and then come right back out, so once you're in, just follow the tension on the rope and *do not stop*."

"Why?" Sheldra asked.

"Because there are things inside that see us as food," he replied. "If you stand still, you won't ever move again."

Sheldra looked much less enthusiastic.

Despite her sudden reluctance, once he got them in the shadow world, they did as they were told. They followed him as he walked to Haven, both of them holding onto the rope with both hands, and Alak had his eyes closed tightly, just letting Kyven lead him.

Once they were out, Alak burped menacingly, but Sheldra was quite solid, looking around Firetail's Square with something approaching awe. "*Jesui deaux*," she breathed as startled Arcans stared at the sudden appearance of the humans.

"You really do have a strong stomach," Kyven mused to the tall Nurysian Cajar.

"*Oua*, when you eat what Cajars eat, *nothing* unsettles you," she said with a slight smile. "May I untie?"

"Go ahead, but we have to keep the rope. It's alright, everyone," Kyven called. "I'm Kyven Steelhammer, the human Shaman. I brought them, and they'll only be here for a short time. Please, don't let us bother you."

It did, however. Alak looked more than a little bit stunned after he got over his queasiness, as Kyven led him along the sunset-lit streets of Haven, with a few hundred Arcans following along behind them as they walked. Kyven met a few of the braver Arcans who approached them, handed out some blessings, and gave Alak and Sheldra a little tour of the center of Haven, but giving nothing strategic away. "Just look around Alak," he said calmly as he carried a little cat Arcan child, her parents hovering very close. "Arcans as far as you can see, and living in well-built houses. No running wild, no chaos, no disorder, just Arcans going about their daily business, living in a large, well-maintained, organized and orderly city. This scene is playing out in any number of other cities right now, but the only difference is, here there's nothing but Arcans. About half a million Arcans live here, and while they don't live in luxury, they are free. The Arcans live here peacefully and happily, and all they want is to be left alone."

"By the Trinity," Alak breathed as he looked at an older Arcan couple sitting on a porch, gawking at the three humans.

"This is what the Masked and the Arcans are fighting for," he said. "To allow Arcans to live here without fear of a slaver's collar, where they can do what they want to do and be surrounded by love and acceptance. Feel

lucky, Alak. Usually, humans aren't allowed here. I'm sure the council will chew my ear for a while for bringing you here," he chuckled. "That's the one rule where humans are treated differently than Arcans. There are *humans* living in Arcan territory, but they live in the border villages. They respect the Arcans' need for *one place* where the most traumatized of the former slaves can come and live without fear. It's very kind of them," Kyven murmured. "But I think you needed to see this, Alak. I think when you go home, you'll have a different point of view."

"Humans live here?" Sheldra asked in disbelief.

"They live in Arcan territory, yes," he replied. "Most of them were prospectors, frontier settlers, mountain men who stumbled into the area and found the Arcans, but then stayed on because they found something they liked."

"And what of those that didn't like what they found?" Sheldra asked pointedly.

"I'd assume that they're dead," he shrugged. "The Arcans have the right to protect this place, Sheldra. After all, it's the only place they have."

"And now we know about it."

"And now the whole world does," Kyven agreed. "But it was necessary. This might be the only chance we have to break the cycle of slavery, so the Arcans of Haven are risking everything for it. I have absolutely no doubt that at least one of the kingdoms of Noraam is going to try to march in here, Alak," he said bluntly. "There's going to be war on the northern plains. The Arcans are going to have to fight for the freedom they've made for themselves, but they'll win."

"You're so sure?"

"Positive," he said simply. "You've never been here in the winter, Alak," he chuckled, a bit ominously. "The Arcans only have to stall until winter, then come back in the spring and bury the soldiers that froze to death. Winter is already on the minds of the Arcans here, they're getting

ready for it. In a month or two, they'll have their first snow. Then it'll pile up by the rod and stay until spring."

"But it's only just turned August!" Alak protested.

"And the first snows will be on the ground in October," Kyven said simply. "September snows aren't very common, but they do happen," he added lightly. "Arcans have that fur for a reason, my friend. They're much hardier than we are."

A commotion to the side drew his attention, and to his surprise, Teacup knocked a couple of Arcans to the ground and raced up to him. "Kyven!" she cried in glee, jumping into his arms. He gave the diminutive raccoon a huge hug, swinging her back and forth a few times, then he set her down. "It's so good to see you!"

"Why Teacup, it's been a long time!" he laughed. "How has your training been going?"

"Well, I hated making barrels, but it turns out I'm really good at mixing paints and painting, so they put me in a painter's shop. I even sold a couple of paintings!"

"Good for you! I'm glad you found your calling," he said with a laugh. "Oh, Teacup, may I present Alak Longwell, king of Carin? And this is his fiancé, Sheldra. Your Majesty, my Lady, this is Teacup, an Arcan I helped bring here when I first came to Haven. She traveled with me."

"Hi!" she said in her bubbly, fearless manner, boldly stepping up and taking Alak's hand. "You're cute for a human!"

"He's also taken," Sheldra murmured, a touch warningly.

"What are you doing here, Kyven? I thought you were fighting in the war!"

"I am, but I can move back and forth quickly," he said mildly.

"How's Clover and Patches?"

“Clover’s fighting in the army. Patches and Tweak are on their way back here to start cutting shops,” he told her. “Hmm, maybe I should just go get them and bring them here. It’d be safer, and I worry about them. Is Watcher here?”

“Who?”

“Oh, that’s right, you don’t know him,” he chuckled. “I sent him to Haven not long after I got back to the human lands.”

“So, why’d you bring the humans here, Kyv?” she asked, looking at Sheldra, who had snapped a fan open and was waving it vigorously just under her chin to cover her nervousness.

“They needed to see Haven, hon,” he replied. “It was important. Wasn’t it, Alak?”

“Yes,” he breathed, looking around. “I believe that it was. I just can’t believe what I’m seeing.”

“You’d be quite surprised if you spent a couple of days here,” Kyven said mildly. “Arcans have built their own society, and while it isn’t perfect, it works for them. Quite an accomplishment for a bunch of *animals*, isn’t it?” he asked pointedly, waving towards the large, well-built council building. A few of the gathered Arcans bristled slightly at Kyven’s choice of words, but since he was a Shaman, they didn’t say anything.

“I would never have believed it if I wasn’t seeing it with my own eyes,” he said honestly.

“*Jesui cest mon vai amo undelle benne vella*,” Sheldra breathed, speaking Cajar.

“Well, I’d better go see Umbra while I’m here, or she’ll let me have it,” he chuckled, glancing at the monarch and his lady. “I think you two can tag along. Umbra would be disappointed if you didn’t meet her.”

“She’s been cranky lately,” Teacup giggled.

“She probably can’t see her feet anymore, she has reason to be cranky.”

Kyven led quite a parade to Umbra’s house, which was the spare house nextdoor to Firetail’s house. She’d moved into it after the others left, he’d been told. “Umbra!” he called as he brought them into Firetail’s compound, the other Arcans staying outside the fence respectfully. “Umbra!”

She waddled out the door and gasped, then ran over to him as fast as she could. She was *very* pregnant, but then again, she was carrying three babies, so it was no surprise that she was pretty round. He gave her a fond hug and accepted a lick on the cheek, then she regarded the two humans curiously. “Who are they, Kyven? They smell like they’re about to pee themselves.”

Sheldra gave an aggressive snap of her fan at that, which made Kyven chuckle. “The two nervous humans are the king of Carin and his wife to be,” he replied with a smile. “Alak and Sheldra. Alak needed to see Haven for himself, and since I was here, I just had to come see you. You’re getting ready to pop, hon,” he said, putting his hand on her very round belly.

“Just a few more weeks,” she replied with a happy nod.

“She, she looks like you,” Alak murmured. “When you’re the other way.”

“I’ve never appeared like that to you before.”

“I’ve seen the wanted posters,” he said with a wry smile.

“I better, since we’re both the same,” Umbra grinned. “I think he looks ugly like this, but he never listens to me,” she said, slapping him lightly on the forearm.

“I thought the black fox was just a creation you used,” Alak said, giving him a curious look.

“Nope, there really are black fox Arcans, they’re just really, really rare,” Kyven replied, giving Umbra a warning look not to say anything

extra. She had a strange mind, but since she was so attuned to deceit and trickery, she picked up on his look with a slight nod and a smile. “I think they’re rather handsome, so I built my alter ego using them as an example.”

“He’s *so* pretty when he’s the right way!” Umbra gushed.

“Pretty?”

“Long story,” Kyven said mildly. “Now, I don’t have much time, hon, so I’m afraid I’m going to have to go. I just wanted to stop and see you.”

“Aww! You need to come back!”

“I will, tomorrow, I promise,” he said, kissing her nose lightly. “Go on back in the house, now. I’m going to take Alak and Sheldra home.”

Teacup gave him another big hug, then the two of them watched from the porch as Kyven had them tie themselves together again, then pulled them back into the shadow world. Alak looked even worse the second time through, and when they got back to his room, he ran straight for the nearest container and got noisily sick. Sheldra looked a little queasy, but she got control of it quickly, fanning away a light sheen of sweat on her dark-skinned face. “Now then, Alak, what do you think?” Kyven asked as he wiped his mouth and came back over to the table where their glasses of wine were waiting.

“I’m not sure what to think,” he said honestly, sitting down. Sheldra joined them and took a deep drink from her glass to settle her stomach, then she sighed audibly.

“Well, there’s more for you to think about,” Kyven told him. “I want to buy every Arcan in Carin.”

“Buy? Buy how?”

“Simple. You use your crown to take them off the farms and out of the kitchens, you pay a fair price for them, and we pay you enough to cover the costs of buying and moving them, with an extra twenty five percent. That way your people at least get something back for their investments. The

alternative is that we simply take them, and they get nothing. Either way, no matter what, you're going to be dealing with owners who have no Arcans."

"I don't think you have the chits for that."

"I'm not paying in chits. I'm paying in gold."

"*Gold*? How on earth can you possibly think that something like *gold* can pay for things? It's a jewelry metal! It's barely worth ten chits a pointweight!"

"Well, mainly because in twenty years, Alak, there won't *be* any more chits," he said pointedly. "If there are no crystals for alchemy, then there are no crystals to crush and make into chits. The chits degrade, Alak, you know that. They only last about ten years, then they have to be replaced. Most people accept degraded chits anyway, taking them for their face value because they know they can trade them in for fresh ones, but do you think they'll still do that after everyone knows that the crystals are drying up, and they can't trade them in anymore?" he asked pointedly. "Oh, I'm sure someone's gonna get the clever idea to use colored glass in chits, but in the long run, the chit is going to disappear as a currency. The Eusicans use silver and gold, and more than a few of us think that those coins are going to replace chits as the currency of Noraam. This gives you the chance to get ready for it. You can be in a better position than most of the other monarchs, because not only will you avoid most of the chaos concerning losing your Arcans, you'll have a treasury filled with silver and gold to use to trade with the Eusicans. They will *flock* here when they hear you've ended slavery in Carin, Alak. It's the only reason they don't trade with us. You can position Carin to be strong as everyone else weakens, maybe even get back some territory from Georvan.

"It's not going to be quick or easy, Alak," Kyven said simply. "But you have to look at the big picture. Yes, there's going to be fury and outrage, maybe even calls for your head. But in ten years, when the Cariners see what's really going on, they're going to look back at what you did and praise you for your foresight and intelligence. Unlike the others monarchs,

you know what's coming better than anyone else, because I rather like you, and I'm a lot more honest with you. And Haven could use a *real* ally out here in Noraam. I won't be coy about that. Flaur is going to backstab us the first chance they get, and we know they will. We'll need contacts, and we can pay well for your help, be it in gold and silver, or in crystals. The Arcans have some crystals stockpiled, and they'd probably sell some of them to you, giving you access to them when few others do. While the other kingdoms fight over the mines, you'll get your crystals from *us*. And all you have to do to get them is bow to the inevitable and move to end Arcan slavery in Carin...because it *will* end, Alak. I think after you sit down and ponder it for a while, you'll see that truth for what it is. You can profit from it and prepare Carin for it so you'll be in a strong position, or you can founder and tread water with all the other monarchs when we come and take the Arcans from you.

"And we *can* do it, Alak," Kyven said grimly. "You know we can, no matter how much you might want to deny it. So, I want you and Sheldra to sit down and talk about it. Look at the advantages and analyze the risks, because there are some risks here, my friend. I'd be a fool to tell you there weren't. But the big picture I want you to look at is this: in twenty years, where will Carin be compared to the other kingdoms if you accept my bargain? You might be one of the most powerful kings in Noraam, Alak, because you *were prepared* when everything went to hell. You could go from the king of the most politically weak kingdom in Noraam to one of its most powerful, if you move carefully and work with an eye towards the future.

"Think about, Alak. Think about it carefully, and explore all your options, because I'm sure that when you study the board, you'll see that my offer is the best thing for Carin. Maybe not in the short term, but it will be in the long run. And that's what truly matters, isn't it?" he asked with a smile as wisps of shadow started to form around him, growing thicker by the second. "Carin will be strong, its people wealthy and important and powerful, and they'll all know that it was your wisdom and foresight that

made it all happen. They might even make a statue of you,” he said with a light smile.

Before Alak could reply, Kyven’s body dissolved away into the wisps of shadow, and he was gone.

That morning, a very sleepy Kyven appeared out of the shadows near a tree at the edge of camp. He yawned and stretched, his back popped audibly, then he started for camp, nodding to a sentry who had approached to challenge him.

It had been a long but very productive night. Kyven had seen enough of Avannar to do something about it, and do something about it he did. Come morning, when the Loremasters went into their crystal vaults to take some out, they were going to find several shelves and a couple of rooms empty. Every single crystal would be gone from those rooms, because Kyven had shadow walked in and drained crystals until he couldn’t take it anymore. He’d barely put a dent in their stocks, but after a couple more weeks, if he got lucky and could keep sneaking in without having to fight, he could do some damage to their inventory. He’d gone after the most important crystals first, mainly their green ones, denying them the ability to heal their troops and get them back into the battle. Their black crystals were held under heavy guard in a fortified vault deep under their building, and he couldn’t drain those even if it was possible...but nothing stopped him from *stealing* them.

All of them. Every black crystal they had that wasn’t already integrated into a weapon or device was stolen, since they held them all in the same place...and they didn’t keep guards *in* the vault, just at the only door in or out of it. Stupid Loremasters, they *knew* what he could do, and they *still* hadn’t put guards on their most valuable asset. Maybe they didn’t think he knew about them, maybe they didn’t think he could get in there, but either way, it was a horrible mistake and he made them pay for it.

He was sure he'd be able to hear their screams even from here, if we went someplace high and quiet.

That wasn't the only thing he stole. That armory room he'd found filled with the annihilators were now empty, and the boxes and crates of them were stacked neatly in their supply depot. That was exactly what Danvers had in mind for Kyven to steal, something small and easy to carry, yet would have definite military worth both to the Loreguard and to them.

The black crystals, well, those were in Haven, under the watchful eye of the council. He didn't want to put those in *anyone's* hands without the council's approval.

He'd also stolen several crates of the new rifles the Loremasters had bought from Briton, which both took them out of the hands of the enemy and gave them more weapons to use. The short rifles were very popular with the humans in the army as well as the Arcans, for they were easier to use from horseback, easier to carry, and were very accurate. The long rifles were being used by humans mainly, since it was a little easier for them to carry them in saddle skirts than it was for the Arcans to carry them as they ran.

In just one night, Kyven had done some damage to Avannar's ability to protect itself, and he figured he could get away with two or three more big heists before the Loreguard wised up and put everything important under heavy guard. He could still steal them, using illusions and trickery, but it would take longer and he'd have to plan his forays.

He came up to the center of camp, and saw that all the Shaman were awake, sitting around the fire, and they looked rather upset. He approached quickly, and before he could say anything, Clover buried him in a deep embrace. "Oh, Kyven, what are we to do?" she asked, then she sniffled.

"What happened, Clover? What's wrong?"

"Brother, Firetail has passed," she said, looking at him with sheened eyes. "They found her in her bed this morning. She passed in her sleep,

peacefully. We have lost our wisest Shaman,” she said, then she put her head on his shoulder and held him.

It was like a blow to the gut. She never *seemed* old, but she was. She was really quite old for an Arcan, and it seemed almost impossible that she’d, she’d, she’d just die in her sleep like that. But she herself said that she could feel her age, and the rigors of the expedition...maybe they’d just been too much for her. He put his arms around Clover and tried to get his mind around it. Firetail, dead. She had been so wise, so calm, so kind. She had been a central part of his life since he’d arrived at Haven, living with her, talking with her, learning from her, laughing with her. She had been so incredibly wise, it seemed almost impossible that she wouldn’t have known that her time was close.

But death was the most cunning hunter of them all.

The Shaman would have to choose a new Firetail. And they’d have to do it right in the middle of a war, when they were scattered...but this would trump the war. The Shaman would return to Haven, mourn the loss of Firetail and bury her by her namesakes on Firetail’s Hill, and they would choose a new Firetail to take over. They wouldn’t be able to do it immediately, but as soon as they concluded the battle at Avannar and destroyed the Loremasters, the Shaman would leave the human lands and return to Haven, where they would meet in a grand council and choose the new Firetail.

But that wasn’t on his mind right now. A thousand memories of Firetail boiled in his mind, of their talks, of her gentle humor, of her incredible wisdom and intelligence. Her rueful laughter as the groundskeepers chased her away from the plants she seemed so adept at killing, her beautiful voice as she sang while she cooked, her gentle eyes that could always convey so much even when she spoke not a single word.

The Shaman had lost one of their very best that day, and like the others, tears started sliding down his cheeks. No Shaman could fail to weep at the loss of Firetail, their wisest Shaman, and their leader.

Chapter 19

The riding gave him time to think.

Death was part of the cycle of life, and while he could understand that, he couldn't help but ponder in it a while as he rode with his nannies, the Lupans, and Lightfoot and Lucky walking beside Spirit, whom he was again riding to help protect his identity. Firetail had been 52 when she died, a very, very old Arcan. He hadn't known that, and it certainly hadn't shown. Like all Shaman, she had been spry and energetic, right up to the end, but in a way that just hid her real age. The Shaman in the army said she'd died of age, that her heart had simply stopped during the night, despite her conditioning, despite her excellent physical condition. It was almost as if her time had come, and no matter how healthy she was, that was that. Her time was over, and she just...died.

It made him ponder the possibility of fate or destiny, that thing were pre-ordained, but he'd never really believed in them...at least until Firetail died. Firetail's death was an argument for the idea of fate, but everything he'd learned told him otherwise. Men and Arcans made their own destinies, fought for them, struggled their lives to achieve them, which could be short or long.

Though 52 didn't seem very long, he realized that in reality, Firetail had lived a very long and full life. The main difference between Arcans and humans outside of their appearances was how Arcans matured. An Arcan could be sexually mature at three, and was considered a full adult by four or five. That gave them 35 or 40 years of adulthood, which was not much shorter than humans, when one considered that a human wasn't really considered an adult until around 16 or 18, depending on the culture. In Atan, a young man could own property and sit in on council meetings at 17, which was considered the official age of majority. Girls, on the other hand,

were considered of marrying age at 15, which was the age of majority for them. Given that the average Atan resident lived about 60 years or so, that gave them 45 years or so of adulthood.

Those were generalities, though. Kyven had been apprenticed to Holm when he was twelve, but even before that, living with his father, he'd been alone most of the time and had had responsibilities. The life of a miner was filled with long, hard days, and Kyven had done what he could to make his father comfortable when he came home, always so dirty that he left a trail and trying to cough out the rock dust that invaded his lungs during his hard day. And out in the villages, most kids were like him, doing a man's work before they started noticing girls. Kids in the cities, with their luxuries and their safety, could afford to be children a lot longer than Kyven had, who had been orphaned and on his own before he was 13, facing the terrifying reality that if he failed the first year exam, he would be homeless, and probably would have lived out his life in the mines, digging for crystals until the rock dust turned his lungs to stone and killed him. And even with the dwindling of the crystals, odds were he'd have died before the mining stopped.

It wasn't the years one lived, but the life one lived in the years he had, he supposed. Arcans lived about 15 to 20 years shorter than humans, but they spent most of it as an adult, and that gave them the time to learn wisdom. Kyven himself was 23, would turn 24 next month, considered a young man in human circles with middle age on the horizon, but considered middle age among the Arcans. In the two years he'd been walking the path of a Shaman, he'd seen and learned more than some men twice his age. He had put a whole lot of living in those two years, had learned a great deal, and had gained at least some wisdom. In some ways, he'd learned more than he ever wanted to know.

But, that was the wind blowing over the field. He had chosen his path, and though it had shown him horrors and put him in a position where he had to fight a war, had to kill, he would walk no other path. He *was* a Shaman, in heart and soul as much as mind, dedicated to his treacherous totem and carrying out her will.

He glanced at Lucky. Lucky was a typical Arcan youth. He looked to be about four, maybe five, just at the very end of his adolescence, might grow a tiny bit more before reaching his full adult height...which wasn't all that much. Like many cats, Lucky was a bit short, but he was sleek, he was a hell of a lot stronger than he looked, and he was fast as lightning. If he were human, he'd still be tied to his mother's apron strings, but among the Arcans, he was considered a full adult, if an inexperienced one. He'd been able to walk since he was just a few months old, and could do a human's work by the time he turned two, and before Kyven had found him, he'd already been sold off the plantation where he'd been born, already put on the auction block. Very young, but in Arcan society, he was an adult, and had already pinned his flower to Lightfoot, who continued to both push him away and keep him very close at the same time. He knew his striped friend, and knew her resolve had almost crumbled. She'd declared her feelings for Lucky already in how she treated him, and now she was just trying to come to terms with it in her own mind.

He patted Spirit's neck as the horse cantered down the overgrown lane, an abandoned road on the brink of being reclaimed by the forest, more of a glorified path than anything else. The sky was dark and threatening, and the rumble of thunder was distant to the west. Storms weren't uncommon in the summer, in fact, they were most of the rainfall they received in the late summer months, but it had been a bit unusual in how dry it had been over the summer, which had pleased Danvers. Armies didn't march well in mud, and that was what was the natural result when rain met dirt roads. A hamlet was supposed to be just ahead, a tiny little village of maybe twelve houses in a natural meadow, according to Clover, so small that most people didn't even know it was there. According to the map, the hamlet was about half a day from Riyan, west of the city and north of the James River, along the path Danvers intended to take to reach Riyan so they could help DeVaur break through and continue north.

"I hear it," he said softly to his horse as he nickered, looking westward. "They'd better get back soon," he remarked to Lucky and Striker. Lightfoot and Fastpaw were ahead, scouting, while Ebony and the Lupans followed

Spirit at a distance, ghosting their backtrail and the Lupans not getting so close it made the horse nervous. Spirit could deal with the Lupans while they were camped, but on the road, his natural fear of Lupans following him never failed to get him a little antsy.

“If we’re as close to the village as you think we are, they should,” Striker noted, adjusting his impact rod a little on his belt. He’d taken to copying Lightfoot in that regard, wearing only a heavy belt holding his impact rod and a shockrod for fighting at a distance, his short-barreled Briton rifle slung over his shoulder. The scrap outside Foggy Peak had taught him that having a ranged weapon he could wield with one hand was a good idea, and it hadn’t been hard for Kyven to get shockrods for all three of his nannies. A Shaman had a little pull in the army. Unlike most others, however, he also carried three annihilators, hooked onto his belt and ready to be pulled off at a moment’s notice. The others were also carrying them, exceedingly lethal little devices given how far they could throw them with that Arcan strength. The three of them had been of a habit of throwing stones when they could as practice, to work on their aim so they could land one where it was needed. Kyven was even carrying several black crystal chips to rearm the devices if they were used, kept in a little metal box in his pack which was sealed with wax. One of the resident alchemists in the army had shown him how to put a new crystal in them, and they only needed a small chip, barely a tenth of a point.

Lightfoot and Fastpaw bounded around a bend in the path and hurried up to them. The sleek felines shifted from running on all fours to standing on their legs with effortless grace when they reached him, and Lucky immediately handed Fastpaw his rifle. “It’s just ahead,” Lightfoot reported. “Half a minar.”

“Any activity?”

“The usual,” she replied curtly, accepting a waterskin from Lucky and taking a drink. “Farmers.”

“Any Loreguard?” he asked, and she shook her head in reply. “How many Arcans?”

“Only a few,” Fastpaw replied. “We saw a couple working in a field, but that’s it. There might be some working in the houses or the barns.”

“Well, we’ll see if we can find shelter from the storm, then break the bad news to the farmers just before we move on,” he grunted, looking back behind him. He gave a whistle, the signal for Ebony and the Lupans to come up. “May as well get the hospitality before they start shooting at us,” he noted, which made Striker grin a little. That had happened that morning, when they came into the small village of Waterford, killed the two Loreguard that had been posted there, then taken the 17 Arcans in the village and freed them. Those Arcans were probably almost to the army by now, since the advance scouts of their army were only about half a day behind. The Arcans were sent back, where the scouts would find them and get them back to the army. From there, they’d either fight or work in the army as best they could.

Yet another little victory.

“Alright, same deal,” he told them. That meant that Lightfoot and his nannies would skirt the hamlet, studying it and looking for anything dangerous, while Kyven rode into town under the guise of an illusion with Lucky with him. Lucky had on a false collar, and would stay close enough to where he could draw the rifle or shockrod Kyven kept on his saddle if he needed to protect himself. The calico got right beside Spirit as the others scattered, Striker falling back to tell Ebony.

The hamlet was indeed very small, and at first glance it looked very crude. There were maybe ten houses and twice as many outbuildings in the hamlet, the houses all built in a circle with their front doors facing a central green, built that way quite deliberately, and at the southern edge of their huge fields of crops. The layout of the place immediately tickled Kyven’s memory, and it took him a minute to realize that these were Amish. They were an ancient religious sect that did not follow the Trinity, having existed

during the Great Ancient Civilization, and were reputed to be very secretive and isolationist. Most people didn't bother the Amish because they were fair and honest when they interacted with the outside world. This was a family farm, each house representing a family in the extended clan, and they worked together to farm the lands behind their hamlet. They had some curious customs, Kyven remembered. They never used buttons, and all men grew beards as part of their religious observances. They were also pacifists, forbidden by their religion to fight. They also spoke their own language, though most of them also spoke Noravi. There was a large population of Amish northeast of Atan, on both sides of the Podac River, though they were almost never seen.

"Amish," Kyven told Lucky. "That means we won't be shot at this time."

"Who are Amish?"

"A religious sect. Some call them a cult, but I find it hard to call pacifists a cult. They're forbidden by their religion to fight, so they won't shoot at us."

"Oh. Well, at least this'll be easy."

"Easy's a point of view, my friend," he said. "We'll see."

Though most of them were out in the fields, there were a couple of people in the hamlet, an old woman and a pair of very young girls, wearing sturdy little peasant dresses and with bonnets over their hair. Kyven raised his hand to the old woman as he approached, then dismounted and handed the reins to Lucky when he got close to the barn from which the old woman exited. "Good afternoon," he called as he approached. "I was seeking a dry place from the coming storm, good woman. Might I impose on you to use one of your barns before the storm gets here?"

"Who art thou?" she asked in a formal tone.

"Kyven Steelhammer, ma'am," he said, taking off his hat. "I'm on my way to Riyan."

She looked to his horse. "I am sorry, Kyven Steelhammer, but we allow no weapons of violence upon our lands," she said strongly.

"Well, you might have to make a tiny exception, at least for a day," he said ruefully. "I'm a forward scout for an army that intends to march past your hamlet. I do need to speak with the people in charge here, to warn them of their coming and assure them that the army won't do them any harm. They only seek to pass by."

She gave him a stern look, then looked to the two curious little girls. She barked at them in Amishar, and the two little girls ran towards the fields. "Thou may discuss the matter with our elder," she declared. "But the Arcan, he may not come. Slavery is a sin, and we will not allow it. If he steps within our walls, we will free him."

"Take off the collar, Lucky," Kyven told him. The woman gave him a look when Lucky pulled his collar off and put it in the saddlebag. "I happen to share your viewpoint in that regard, ma'am. In fact, that's part of what the army that's coming is about. They're going to try to end the Arcan slavery. Lucky wears the collar as a deception when we move about, nothing more."

She did give him a somewhat approving look. "Bring your horse into the barn," she told him.

The old woman fussed a bit over Lucky as Kyven unsaddled Spirit and put him in a stall the old woman provided, forking him some hay. Kyven also made sure to unload his rifle and hide his weapons under his saddle, even leaving behind his fairly large knife for fear that they might consider it a weapon. This could possibly be the first village they passed that they didn't have to subdue the populace, so he wanted to make a good impression. They might even try to buy some of their goods, the Amish were well known to always have plenty stored. Kyven patted Spirit's neck one final time and let him go to his dinner as he joined the old woman and Lucky, as she herded him towards the large doors, one of the houses visible

beyond. "Thou art in need of a meal, young buck," she told Lucky. "Thou art too thin!"

"I'm not being starved, ma'am," he said with a chuckle.

"That's no lie. He eats twice as much as I do," Kyven teased.

"Well, I'm still a growing boy," Lucky said lightly.

The old woman led them to the house, and had them wash their hands and clean their shoes upon entering. Kyven pulled his hat off and let it hang behind his back by its straps as he stepped into a large, airy house filled with homemade furniture and curtains, a rug on the floor in the dining room past the kitchen in which they entered. "Oh, I'd better warn the others not to cause trouble. I have four other Arcans out there, ma'am, watching the place. I'll call them in."

"Aye, that'd be best," she told him.

Kyven walked out to where he could be seen and whistled shrilly, then waved towards the house. Almost immediately, the others came out of the forest, the Lupans staying behind in the trees. "Put your weapons in the barn in Spirit's stall, by my saddle," he told them. "These are Amish, they don't believe in weapons. I don't want to offend them."

Lightfoot looked decidedly annoyed, but she nodded.

Lightfoot, Striker, and Ebony caused their own problems when the old woman saw them. She gasped and gawked, then hastily turned her back. "Master Steelhammer, thy friends art naked!" she said, her cheeks flaming.

"Oh. Oh, well, they're Arcans, and I'm bloody not well going to try to make them wear clothes. Not *those* three," he said with a chuckle. "But if I might borrow a few blankets, I think they wouldn't object to using them to cover themselves while they're here."

"Aye, aye, Elder Jacob would die of fright should he see them thus!"

“You heard the lady,” Kyven told them. “We don’t want to cause a panic, do we?”

“You owe me,” Lightfoot growled, which made him chuckle.

The old woman brought down very elaborate quilts, which the Arcans used as cloaks, throwing them over their shoulders and pulling them around so they were draped over. The old woman sighed in relief when Ebony settled her blanket, then invited them into the dining room. She served them glasses of cider and set a platter of bread and butter down in front of Lucky, then rattled it imperiously. Lucky took up a piece of bread under her stern eye, which made her nod and scurry back to the kitchen.

Elder Jacob was definitely noticeable when he arrived. He was old and gray-haired, but he was still strapping and looked quite fit. He wore denim coveralls, a simple blue shirt, and had a straw hat in his hand, which he hung on a peg in the kitchen by the door, Kyven could see. He spoke quietly to the old woman in Amishar, then hurried into the dining room. “Thou wished to speak with me?” he called in a strong, no-nonsense voice. This man was used to giving orders.

“Yes, sir,” Kyven answered, standing up. “I’m Kyven Steelhammer.”

The man’s eyes widened. “The human Shaman?” he asked.

Kyven chuckled. “Yes, that’s me,” he replied. “I’m surprised you’ve heard of me.”

“I heard stories of thee in Riyan when I went to go sell some of our early wheat,” he replied. “Thou art reviled as a wicked man,” he stated.

“I’m sure they see me that way,” he said easily. “A man’s enemies are often considered wicked, even when they’re actually in the right.” He motioned. “These are my friends. This is Lucky, Lightfoot, Ebony, Striker, and Fastpaw,” he introduced.

“Welcome to Henvver,” he said, sitting down. “Anna said thou were from an army?”

He nodded. "An army of humans and Arcans doing battle against the Loremasters," he replied. "They intend to march past your hamlet, sir. They're on their way to Riyan. I'm riding in far vanguard to give the army intelligence of what's ahead."

"And what will this army do?"

"March right by," he said immediately. "Though I'm sure General Danvers might bargain with you over some of your staples. He'll pay a fair price," Kyven assured him. "They're not going to trample your fields or loot and pillage your farmstead, sir. They'll pass by to the south, coming up the abandoned road that leads to Waterford, then they'll turn east and use the wagon track I think you use to reach Riyan."

"It is against our religion to give supplies to those who do violence," he said sternly. "But neither will we stand in thy way."

"Then they'll pass by quickly and try their best not to cause you any trouble," Kyven said simply. "The army's objective isn't to terrify the countryside. They're fighting to free the Arcans from slavery."

"A noble pursuit," the elder said with a nod. "Though violence is never the answer."

"I'm afraid we'll have to respectfully disagree in that regard, sir," Kyven said calmly. "But it does raise an issue that will come up. We saw a couple of Arcans in the fields as we approached. The army will want to free them from their collars, but I get the feeling they're here of their own free will."

"They are," he replied.

"If you would be so kind, may I meet them and speak with them before we leave, after the storm passes?"

"Thou mayest," he nodded.

"Thank you. And thank you for the use of your barn. Once you're satisfied as to my answers, we'll wait out there for the storm to pass. We

don't want to inconvenience you or your family."

"That isn't necessary, for I have questions for thy friends as surely as thou has questions for Jedediah and Ruth."

"The Arcans?"

He nodded. "When they came among us, we gave them proper names. They have embraced the true faith and live among us as equals. I will take thee to their house. Anna, would thou please see to the comfort of our guests?" he said as he stood up.

Kyven followed him out the front door of the house, which opened to the lawn in the center of the houses. Other families were moving in from the fields as the storm gathered to the west, who all stared at Kyven intently as he followed the gray-haired elder. "Might I ask how your people feel about the Shaman, sir?" he asked politely.

"We tolerate them as we tolerate those of the Trinity," he replied. "The true faith is not for everyone."

"So long as you don't think we're evil," Kyven said with a light chuckle. "Some people think I sold my soul to the devil. The rest of them refuse to admit I'm real."

"Art thou real?"

"Yes, sir," he said calmly. "I really am a Shaman. I could show you, if you like."

"Ah, no. Our faith is unsure about the Shaman. Shaman are Arcans, and Arcans are in something of a gray area in our faith. They are sentient beings and obviously possessed of souls, but their status as not being human means that some of the strictures we must follow do not apply to them. In the Bible, only humans are forbidden to use magic. It makes no mention of the Arcans, so there's some debate among the elders just where the Shaman fit in the grand design."

“It’s fairly straightforward. If it doesn’t offend you, I could explain it while it rains. We won’t have much else to do,” he chuckled. “So, since I *am* a human that uses magic, I guess I’d be considered evil?”

Jacob gave him a sly look. “Correct, but we can discuss the matter at length while the storm passes. The Bible also says that we may question, and since this is something we know little about, then it is good to question.”

“I’d be happy to answer any question you have, sir,” Kyven said as they approached what looked to be the newest house. Jacob stepped up to the porch and knocked, and almost immediately, a slender female raccoon Arcan opened the door. She wore a similar dress to the other women, and he saw that she was blind in her right eye, for it was milky white.

“Ruth, this is Kyven Steelhammer, the human Shaman,” Jacob introduced. “He wished to see you and ensure you are well.”

“You’re a Shaman?” she asked, gaping at him.

“Yes I am, little one,” he replied in an immediately gentle, nurturing voice. “I was going to free you from what I thought was slavery, but it seems that you’re not as enslaved as I first thought.”

She gave him a glorious smile. “Come in, Shaman, come in!” she invited, stepping out of the doorway. “Please make yourself at home!”

Ruth’s husband was also a raccoon, a bit taller and burlier than most, and like Ruth, he showed signs of abuse. He only had two fingers and a thumb on his left hand, and his left ear was missing. He entered the living room and shook Kyven’s hand when Jacob introduced him, then Ruth made them cider as they and Jacob sat at their table. Kyven made no pretenses about it, he immediately came right out and asked if they were happy where they were.

“Oh, yes, Shaman, we are,” Jedediah replied, taking a cup of cider from Ruth with a nod. “The humans here have been very kind to us. They

took us in, nursed us back to health, and they gave us a place where we belong.”

“What happened to you?” Kyven asked.

“Oh, this? Well, after we escaped, we blundered into a bear’s den,” he replied, touching the area where his ear would have been. “We knew nothing about the forest, so we knew no better.”

“Well, when the army gets here, I think Dancer might be able to do something about it,” he said. “If you want.”

“They can restore what was lost?”

“I’m not entirely sure,” Kyven said honestly. “But it doesn’t hurt to have her look, does it? I know a healing bell can restore lost body parts, and there’s nothing an alchemical device can do that a Shaman can’t do, so long as the Shaman’s strong enough. Dancer’s our best healer, so we’ll have her take a look and see if she can do anything to help you.”

“If it would be no trouble,” Ruth said demurely.

The rain started suddenly, pounding on the wooden shingle rooftop, and a loud peal of thunder rattled the cottage. “Well, sounds like we’re stuck here, so we may as well be comfortable,” Kyven chuckled.

He spent most of the storm in polite but pointed debate with Jacob over the Shaman and magic. He answered quite a few questions about it, explaining the spirits, and discussing the emergence of human Shaman. “I’m not the only one,” he told Jacob. “There’s another, just a girl, that we found not long ago. The spirits feel that the humans need us, else we wouldn’t be here. Shaman go where they are needed, but in this case, we’re being *born* where we’re needed.”

“These spirits, they’re like the old tales?”

“Well, they’re not the evil spirits you describe from your holy book, sir,” he answered. “They represent the forces of nature. Animals, elements, that kind of thing. They’re not evil like the demons of your bible, but not all

of them are benevolent. There are some nice ones and some not so nice ones, just as not every human or Arcan you meet may necessarily be nice.”

He nodded sagely. “And you believe there will be more?”

“I think so,” he said, leaning back in his sturdy chair as Ruth poured him another glass of cider. “With the Arcans fighting for their freedom and the crystals the humans depend on nearly gone, the humans will probably need us more than ever.”

“That is why we reject technology,” Jacob said simply. “A man must make do with his hands, with what he can build, with what crops he can sow. To overly rely on machines or magic is to sin, for it goes against God’s design. We use some tools and machines, but we could easily do without all but the most basic.”

“Again, we’ll respectfully disagree on that, sir,” Kyven said with a light smile. “I see use in technology, but I have to agree with you in on way. The humans have painted themselves into a corner. They’ve come to rely on the Arcans they enslave and the crystals they mine. Without them, human civilization will be thrown into chaos. People will starve when the Arcans are freed from the farms and plantations, and kingdoms will fight one another for what crystals remain, causing untold death and destruction and misery. I hate to see it, but in a way, it’s necessary. As you said, it’s time for the people of Noraam to learn how to do for themselves. They’ve built their entire civilization on the pain and suffering of others, and it must come to an end.”

“An astute observation,” Jacob said, nodding to Ruth. “I thank thee, my friend,” he said as she set a plate of warm bread and churned butter before them. “And these spirits intend to do something about it?”

“I think so,” he said. “I’m not quite wise enough to understand all of their intent, but I can see why human are being born Shaman. So they can be there to help when the misery comes, try to alleviate it. Though they are against what the humans are doing, they’re not against the humans themselves. They don’t want to upset human civilization and cause

suffering, but they've reached the point where they see no other choice in the matter. The human Shaman will try to lessen the suffering."

"So thou has mankind trade one addiction for another?" he asked pointedly.

Kyven opened his mouth, but said nothing. "That's a good point," he finally said, scratching his chin. "I don't think the humans would ever depend on human Shaman like they do the Arcans and the crystals, but it's something we'd certainly have to keep from happening. We want to help them, not have them depend on us to where they can't live without us."

"Astute," he repeated. "And what of thee, Kyven? Thou does talk of the human shaman as *they*, not *we*."

Kyven chuckled. "I'd never serve mankind like that, I'm afraid. They're too afraid of me. My abilities as a Shaman are...well, let's just say that I do the dirty work, Elder Jacob. I'm actually not a very nice man. I'm a warrior, not a nurturer."

"And yet thou nurtures the Arcans," he noted, looking at Jedediah, who was coming downstairs. "I could see the care thou has for them."

"Well, they *let* me," he chuckled. "But the humans are too terrified of me. They'd never accept me, because in a way, I reinforce all the lies they've been told. My powers as a Shaman are geared for deception, lies, and spreading discord and fear. I'm a spy, a thief, and when needs be, an assassin, Master Jacob," he said honestly. "When the humans say Shaman are evil and point at me, well, I can't really say too much, because the things I do aren't nice. The Arcans understand that while what I do may be fearsome, *I'm* not."

"Thou wouldst still do these things if thou were not a Shaman?"

"If I had to, but probably not," he said after a moment's thought. "My magic is based on cunning and deceit. Without that, I'd be a terrible spy. But if it was what I had to do to help the Arcans, then I'd do it. I'd be terrible, but I'd do it."

“Thou art brave, telling me so boldly that deceiving others is thy purpose. It puts everything thou hast told me in doubt.”

Kyven laughed. “I know. This is the truth in the lie, rather than the lie in the truth,” he said with a mischievous smile.

Lightfoot stepped into the open back door of the house and looked towards the table. The quilt she had over her shoulders wasn’t being held together, so Jacob blushed a bit when he saw about everything about a rod wide across the middle of Lightfoot’s front. “Loreguard,” she said quickly.

“Here? Now?” Kyven asked, and she nodded. “Do you have a cellar, Jedediah?” he asked quickly.

“Of course, Shaman,” he said in confusion.

“Get in it, both of you. You too, Lightfoot,” he said as he quickly stood. “They’ll try to take you if they know you’re here.”

“The patrol that often passes knows of them, and believe them owned by us,” Jacob said as he stood. “We simply don’t correct them.”

“Well, they’ll take them now, we’ve depopulated the slave pens,” he said, looking out the door in a glance. Ten horses were coming up the wagon track from Riyan, moving at a steady walk in the tail end of the rain. The men all had their rain ponchos on, blue with gold trim. “Go, go!” he said quickly, motioning at them.

“You will do no violence upon our land, Shaman,” Jacob said sternly.

“I won’t do them any harm at all, Master Jacob,” Kyven promised. Lightfoot took Ruth by the arm and helped her as she followed Jedediah into the pantry, no doubt where the door to the cellar was. As soon as they were out of sight, Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits and built an illusion in his mind’s eye, then beckoned to the shadow fox to grant him the energy to project it. Jacob gasped when Kyven’s form blurred, and one of the younger men he’d seen coming in just before the storm replaced him, a tall, ruggedly handsome young man with hair the color of straw. He immediately

assumed a posture more akin to the Amish, straight and proud. “Just don’t give me away,” he said in a different voice.

“I will not lie. But, I will also not grant information when not asked for it,” he said with a slight smile.

Kyven walked across the interior green, the rough circle of common yard shared by all the houses, heading back for Jacob’s house. He reached it before the Loreguard reached the hamlet, since Jacob had gone out to greet them. Anna chattered sternly at him in Amishar, but he held up his hands. “It’s Kyven,” he said in Ruth’s voice. “This is a disguise.”

“Thou has used magic here?” she demanded.

“It was use magic or kill those men coming to your home, which Jacob told me not to do,” he said brusquely. “Where are the Arcans?”

“The three tall ones are in the cellar,” she replied. “The calico went to the barn to tend thy horse.”

“Keep them there til the soldiers leave, no matter what,” he said immediately and headed for the back door. Jacob had engaged the Loreguard as Kyven made his way for the barn where Spirit was stalled. Kyven listened as he moved out in view of the Loreguard, listened as the Loreguard questioned Jacob about seeing anything unusual. He almost winced when Jacob quite bluntly told them about Kyven’s visit. “We had a lone traveler come in from the storm,” he answered, and Kyven cursed a bit inwardly. “A young man on his way to Riyan. As thou knows, we always offer hospitality to those in need who come to us in peace.”

“Is he still here?”

“Somewhere about. With the rain ending, perhaps he prepares to leave.”

“I’ll speak with this traveler, perhaps he’s seen something,” the patrol leader said as he dismounted. “We’ll start looking for him with his horse. Where is it stalled?”

Kyven reached the barn and immediately called out as loudly as he dared. “Lucky? Lucky!” he hissed.

“Up here, Kyv,” he replied quietly from the loft. “I brought everything but your saddle up here.”

“Good man!” he said quickly. He dismissed the illusion of the Amish and replaced it with a face he knew from the army, a rather plain young man, bordering on homely, with greasy black hair and an acrid, unpleasant odor about him which was also implanted into the illusion. He opened a side door away from the Loreguard and left it open to explain where the Amish man went, and hurried over to Spirit’s stall.

The Loreguard officer and Jacob entered the barn as he threw the saddle over Spirit’s blanketed back. “Young man, this man wishes to speak to you,” Jacob said, doing a surprisingly good job not reacting to Kyven’s unknown appearance.

“Well, sure, your honor,” he said in a Carin accent, shuffling out. The tall, gray-templed man’s nose wrinkled a bit when Kyven got close enough to smell.

“Your name, traveler?”

“Ardy, sir,” he replied.

“Your destination and purpose for traveling?”

“Lookin’ for work, sir, goin’ Riyan way,” he replied. “I’m a cooper sir,” he said, inflating his chest in pride. “Just finished my apprenticeship and lookin’ for a shop in need of a journeyman.”

“Odd that you have no cooper’s tools,” the officer said, looking at his saddle.

“Well, tools cost money, sir, and my master was fairly known as a cheap man,” he said in an honest-sounding voice. “Why do you think I left his shop after my apprenticeship? I’d not earn enough to eat if I stayed there, no sir!”

“And who was your master?”

“Why, Ingram Copperband, sir, cooper o’ Greenjack,” he replied. There really was a cooper named Ingram in Greenjack, so Kyven wasn’t afraid to name that name. Keeping his eye out for such information was part of what he did.

“And how does such a poor journeyman afford a fine horse like this? This is a bred horse, not a village nag.”

“Ain’t mine, sir, belongs to my cousin. He works on a horse ranch out Rallan way. He has business in Riyan next month, and will come for his horse when he gets there.”

“Strange that it has no brand.”

“Brand? That’s a Frelander thing, not what we do in Carin,” he replied smoothly. “Ain’t no reason for it, methinks, just makes the horse mad and likely to be cantankerous. I got his papers, if’n you wanna see ‘em. Tack signed ‘em over to me and had me sign him back over to Tack, postdated so’s I’d have to give the horse back,” he chuckled. “If’n I don’t have the horse back to him by the first of November, I guess I’d be a horse thief.”

The officer gave him a searching look, just outside of smelling range. “I don’t think that’ll be necessary. Have you seen anything unusual?”

“Unusual?” Kyven repeated, then he spat. “Things are goin’ to hell, that’s what’s unusual! Beg pardon, sir,” he said to Jacob. “They’s an *army* of Arcans down Foggy Peak way! They just marched in and took it over, I heard, and ain’t nobody did nothin’ about it! And if that ain’t enough, them Flaurens are marchin’ up from they kingdom and causin’ all sorts of trouble! We heard they was some kind of fight or battle out east of Rallan, ‘atween the Flaurens and the Loreguard. Where was the Carin army to protect the borders?” he asked, a bit indignantly. “Well, I ain’t a’gonna live in a kingdom where the king lets crap like that happen, no sir! So I’m goin’ to Riyan, I am, where things like that don’t happen!”

“So, you haven’t seen any of these Arcans, or met any travelers on the road that heard about where they might be going?”

“No sir, I been riding these back roads,” he replied. “I be a lone traveler, with no pistol or weapon but a stout knife, and I heard tales that bandits sometimes take up on Tobacco Road. I thought it safer to kinda meander into Riyan along the country lanes. My second cousin Bard, he’s a teamster, so he knows the back ways well. Owns his own wagon, he does,” Kyven said, again puffing out his chest. “He told me which ways to go to get to Riyan without seeing many folks, cause bandits don’t like to haunt roads ain’t nobody usin’. It’s a quick way to starve.”

“No weapon, eh? Then why is there a shockrod holstered on your saddle?” the officer asked.

“Why, it ain’t nothin’ but a fake, your honor, sir,” he replied, turning around and stepping back to Spirit. While his back was turned, he covered the shockrod with an illusion of his old fake one he used to have, but the illusion had no socket at the base for a crystal, it appeared to be a single piece of metal. “My friend Grayson, he made it for me, he’s an alchemist’s apprentice. I figured if someone with bad ideas saw it, they might just let me go by.” Kyven drew the metal rod and offered it to the officer. The man took it and turned it over in his hands, then he laughed.

“You’re a lot smarter than you look, Ardy,” he said as he handed it back.

“I just *look* dumb, your honor,” Kyven replied.

“Well, that does make things easier for us. We’re going the way you came, so we shouldn’t have too much trouble.”

“Well, they’s a tree that fell over the road about six minars up Waterford way,” he supplied. “But it ain’t so big a horse can’t step over it. Now, if’n you’re usin’ a wagon, well, you might want to take a couple axes with you.”

“We’ll clear it, citizen, thanks for the information,” the officer said, stepping back out of the illusory miasma of Kyven’s bad body odor. “You’re free to go.”

“Thanky kindly, your honor sir,” Kyven said with a clumsy bob of a bow, then turned to finish saddling his horse.

The officer and Jacob left the stable, to get away from his smell more than anything else, leaving Kyven alone to finish saddling Spirit. “Slick,” Lucky whispered from the loft.

“Stay here until they leave, I won’t be far away,” he whispered back.

Kyven led Spirit out of the barn and mounted him, making sure to look not entirely professional about it, looking like a man not used to riding horses, but getting the hang of things. He tipped his hat to the Loreguard soldiers with their horses standing in a line as he passed, then walked Spirit down the wagon track from which they’d come, moving like a man with all the time in the world. Once he was out of sight, however, he immediately pulled Spirit off the track and into the forest, tethered him in a little void in the trees that would give him a tiny bit of grazing, then crept back towards the farm on silent, moccasin-clad feet. He crawled up to the edge of the trees, looking through a bramble bush, and startled a small milk snake as he laid down a bit uncomfortably, watching. Jacob and the Loreguard officer spoke for about five minutes more, then Anna came out and brought the men all large glasses of cider. The men took them with thanks and quickly drained them as the officer grilled Jacob a bit about any other travelers that might have come through over the last few days, then, as he feared, the man asked about the Arcans on the farm.

“They were inside a bit ago, but might have—” he started, but the officer cut him off.

“Might have escaped. Jacob, I thought I’d give you a friendly warning. I’ve been ordered to commandeer any and all Arcans I find on my patrol for the war effort. You’ve been a good friend to us over the years, and I really don’t want to take yours. Now, seeing as I don’t entirely remember asking

you where those Arcans are, I'll just assume that they're not here. And from now on, if I don't see them when I patrol, well, I'll just *assume* that they either ran off or you sold them. I won't ask, so you won't have to answer. If it turns out my assumption is wrong, I suggest you keep them out of sight at all times, at least for the foreseeable future. If I see them, I'll have to take them."

"I will keep that in mind, Lieutenant," Jacob replied calmly.

The officer nodded, then remounted and led his men towards the track to Waterford. Jacob watched them go for a moment. Kyven had to smile, at least a little bit. Not *everyone* in the Loreguard was a bad man. Danna proved that. There were good men in that organization, who sadly were just fighting for the wrong side.

Kyven would have still killed him, had it come down to it, however.

The patrol disappeared down the Waterford path at a walk, and Kyven waited nearly five minutes before he went around the brambles and stepped out of the forest. Lucky was visible in the doorway of the barn as he trotted back, and Kyven reached him quickly. "Go tell Anna to let the nannies out, I'll go get Lightfoot," he told him.

"Alright," he replied, hurrying for the house.

Jacob met him at Jedediah and Ruth's house, as he neared the back door. "I heard what he said," Kyven told him. "I suggest you don't let them out of the house until all this is over, Master Jacob."

"We will take care of them, Shaman. I must admit, thy deception was quite convincing."

"It's what I do, Master Jacob," he said modestly. "I trained for years to talk my way past people. And like you, I avoid violence whenever possible. Our only real difference is I *will* resort to it when necessary. Well, and I'll lie through my teeth."

Jacob chuckled. "Thou art quite a complicated man, Kyven Steelhammer."

"Thank you, Master Jacob," he said with a mysterious smile.

Lightfoot was already in the kitchen when he got there, her quilt on the floor. Jacob blushed a bit at the sight of her. "Did you hear?" Kyven asked.

She nodded. "We have to go."

"Lucky's fetching the nannies. I'll call that patrol back to the army, but will ask them to capture them gently. The officer seemed a decent fellow, I'd rather not see him hurt."

"Sentimental."

"Good men are hard to find, Lightfoot. I like to keep them around, even if they're on the wrong side."

"My belt?"

"In the barn," he told her.

She hurried past him and dropped to all fours in a kind of diving lurch out the door, hitting the ground on her hands, then she bounded towards the barn on all fours.

"Thy companion is quite intimidating, despite her size," Jacob noted.

"You have no idea," Kyven chuckled. "We'll be on our way now, Master Jacob. Thank you for your hospitality."

"Thou came in peace, and so we welcome thee," he answered, shaking Kyven's hand again.

"I'll make triple sure the army doesn't bother you when it comes through. But I will have Dancer come and check over the Arcans, see if she can do anything for them. Or for you and your kin, if you need any healing."

“We would not accept magical healing, Kyven,” he said simply. “But the Arcans, well, they are a gray area,” he smiled.

“Good man,” Kyven chuckled, patting him on the shoulder.

Months of quiet yet steely determination had *finally* paid off.

Lucky had finally conquered Lightfoot.

Kyven almost chuckled as he heard Lightfoot growling softly across the camp, where Lucky was enjoying the reward of months of determined chasing on top of the sleek, dangerous little cat, making sure to give Lightfoot a night to remember without being so enthusiastic that he ruined the whole thing. Like most Arcans, Lucky was no virgin, sharing comfort freely with some other females in the army, and he showed a talent for lovemaking that seemed a bit beyond his four years of age. And judging by the writhing of Lightfoot’s tail, flailing about between Lucky’s knees as he thrust into her, she was *seriously* enjoying it.

Hell, Kyven was surprised that Lucky got Lightfoot on her back. She liked doing it on her hands and knees most of the time, or on top. She didn’t often like being put under a male, where she probably felt like she had less control. But then again, Lucky wouldn’t be there long if she was serious about getting him off of her.

Ebony ignored them as she came up to him, stepping over Sirra’s tail. Striker was out looking around, and Fastpaw was laying near the fire, already asleep. “Are you sure we can’t go with you?” she asked.

“Not for this,” he said as he unbuttoned his shirt. “This has been a long time coming, Ebony.”

“I don’t understand why you haven’t done it already.”

“There was more to gain in watching them than killing them,” he replied. “But with the army getting closer, it’s time to put Avannar in a state of complete chaos. Nothing will do that faster than killing off the

Councillars, and as many of the Loreguard generals as I can find. Well, I'm not killing *those*, I'm just gonna kidnap them," he chuckled as he removed his shirt. "Greggson will try to kill me the next time he sees me. By now, I'm sure they realize I was the one that raided their armories. I'm the only one who *could have*, the way it was done. No forced entry, nobody sees a thing, just poof, their black crystals gone and many of their black crystal devices gone. My usefulness to them is over because I'm now actively attacking them, so now they'll take me out...if I don't get them first."

"I wish I could go with you."

"You're needed here," he said with a slight smile. "After all, Lucky and Lightfoot aren't really paying much attention."

She gave him a wolfish smile as he unbuttoned his pants, then stepped out of them, leaving him naked but for his necklace. He touched the Arcan face of Danna and willed the change, then felt his bones turn to icewater as he flowed into his Arcan form. He shook himself after it was over, put his hands on the small of his back and stretched backwards languidly, then flexed his clawed fingers. "I'll be out most of the night. I want you to gather everyone up and pull back to the army if I'm not back by sunrise."

"When are you going to sleep, Kyven?" Ebony asked.

"Eventually," he chuckled. His body melted into shadow, nothing but a silhouette against the campfire, then he converged a gateway into the shadow world with an absent wave of his paw. "Be careful. I'll see you soon."

"You're the one who should be careful," she replied.

He stepped into the gateway and into the shadow world, which was now much less hostile. The first thing he did, what he always did, was assess where the *things* were. They'd taken notice of the gateway, but they weren't moving quite yet. They'd learned from experience that now they couldn't detect the invader, so while they were on alert for anything unusual, they weren't moving towards it quite yet, waiting for something

else. The *things* didn't congregate, he'd come to learn. They each stayed to themselves, and some of them stayed generally in the same place, as if that were its territory or den or whatever. They came together only as a side effect of chasing one of them around, and while he wasn't sure if they cooperated, they didn't fight among themselves. He took a few steps to Avannar and looked around from above, seeing that they were continuing to build fortifications, tearing down some buildings to pile against the gates to make them impossible to breach, stringing a chain across the wide Podac River to stop boats, but abandoning the unwallled southern half of the city. Cannons bristled both on the walls and in fortified emplacements in the city so they could fire at trajectory, and there were quite a few men wielding muskets moving around, many of them in civilian clothes. As Kyven suspected, they'd conscripted just about any man that could hold a musket for the defense of the city.

Kyven moved to the headquarters and looked within. It had triple the guards from last time, which were ten times the usual, putting nearly fifty guards on every floor, both in static positions and roaming the hallways. The Councillars weren't in the lower areas, they were instead up in the towers, including Greggson. He found them all, in fact, in the council chamber in the north tower, a position protected by that powerful grounder. Kyven could look in from the shadow world, but he couldn't converge a gateway, the grounder would prevent it.

Well, if he could *look* in, why couldn't he *listen*?

He concentrated hard on it for several moments, until his will and intent actually started breaching the boundary. Faint garbled murmurs reached his ears, and when he closed his eyes, they sharpened and got loud enough to hear. “—four days,” one of them said. “It's only going to take them two days to march from Balton.”

“What about our naval reserves?” an older voice asked.

“Blockaded at the mouth of the bay,” a woman replied. “The Georvans, the Baltons, and the Menn have the entire bay mouth filled with ships. We

can't get any more shipments in from Briton except by Carin. Longwell at least isn't openly resisting us."

"He's got his own problems, with his army sealed by a truthkeeper and the Georvans with a big army that has to pass back through his territory when we repel them," another said. "They very well may try to conquer Carin as a consolation for failing to take Avannar."

"What about that Arcan army?"

"It's disappeared again, but reports put it somewhere near Riyan," a different woman replied. "As fast as it can move, we have trouble keeping track of its exact location. That fucking Shaman runs in front of it blinding our scouts and misdirecting reports."

"Phaugh, we worry too much about them."

"That army is being commanded by Wilson Danvers, who's twice the general that the others are," an older voice snapped. "I'm more worried about the Arcans than I am DeVaur and the Flaurens."

"I can't believe he betrayed us," a younger man grunted.

"What about the mountains?"

"From what little we've managed to get back from our scouts, there are Arcans filling every viable pass in the Smoke Mountains from Carin all the way up to near Two Rivers. They're occupying all the mining villages, and the crystal supplies are already starting to dry up. They're also digging in. It looks like they intend to defend the mountains and the villages from attack."

"We can't allow that to happen. We should send an expeditionary force to Atan to hold it. There's a viable path to Deep River from Atan, as long as it's horses only."

"The bulk of the Arcans are in Atan, Councillar Benderson," an acid voice replied. Kyven opened his eyes and located who was talking, a mature, handsome man he knew as Councillar Terenton. "We'd have to

send at least fifty thousand men to knock them out of there, and we can't afford that many."

"They're just *Arcans*," Councillar Willivon May snorted, who was a nearly elderly woman with a gray bun.

"And those Arcans managed to capture General Taggan Wild's entire army," Councillar Terenton replied darkly. "Pannen may be a novice, but she's proving she isn't stupid. If she can beat Tag, she can hold Atan against anything but an overwhelming force."

"Well, she won't be a problem for long," Councillar Rell said with an evil smile. "As soon as our assassin gets to Atan, he'll take care of her."

"And you trust an Arcan to go against its own?" May asked.

"This one? It does what we tell it to do," he smirked. "It may be a stupid animal, stupid enough to come back to us after we let it go, but it can kill Pannen."

They sent an Arcan to kill Danna? He'd better warn her about that, the Shaman could probably find him before he managed anything.

"No human's going to get close enough to do it," Greggson said with a sober stare. "Pannen has too many Arcans around her, and they're fanatically loyal."

"That reminds me, Greggson, has *he* visited you lately?"

"No sir," Greggson replied. "He usually comes late at night."

"Then I think you'd better go back to your office," Terenton told him. "We don't want him to show up where we're not expecting him. If we can capture him, we could break this entire invasion. I have no doubt he knows *everything*."

"We caught him once before, sir, without much success. He vanished out of the Black Keep like a ghost."

"We have a better plan this time," Terenton assured him.

Curious, Kyven followed Greggson as he left the council chamber and returned to his office on the sixth floor. When he got close to it, however, Kyven converged a gateway into an empty office along his path, then opened the door and yanked Greggson inside as he passed by. The Councillar gasped and nearly fell down, stumbling into a chair. “What the fuck—“ he started, but went silent when he found himself staring at nothing but a pair of glowing emerald eyes, the rest of the body hidden in the shadows. “You!”

“I thought I missed you, Greggson,” Kyven said in a low tone. “I went to your office and you weren’t there.”

He was quiet a long moment. “They’ve set a trap for you.”

“I know they did. You’ve been telling them everything, after all,” Kyven said easily. Greggson tried to hide his surprise, but without much success, and that made Kyven chuckle. “Come now, Greg, I’m not stupid. I knew you were playing both sides of the net, so I let you pass along information I wanted the Loremasters to know.”

Greggson blew out his breath, then nodded. “Be lucky you didn’t get caught. Don’t go into my office, Shaman. You won’t like what’ll happen.”

“Oh, I’ve already been there. It’s fairly clever, but it’s not well hidden,” Kyven lied easily. “So, as they say, Greggson, your usefulness to me is setting like the sun.”

Greggson didn’t even react. “You offered to take me from here,” he said in a low, weary tone. “I accept.”

Kyven raised a single brow, though Greggson couldn’t see it. “That’s the last thing I expected to hear from you.”

“I’ve seen the reports, and after what you did, I can see what’s coming,” he said in a defeated tone. “By the time the armies are here and ready, you’ll have stripped the Loreguard of everything that can turn the battle in our favor. Nothing we have can stop you. We will lose, and I’d rather be a live traitor than a dead patriot.”

There was a curious hitch in Greggson's voice, a timbre that made Kyven believe him. A gateway converged behind Kyven, and he let the shadow melt away from his hand as he reached out for Greggson. "Alright then," Kyven said. "I promised you I'd get you out of here alive, and I'll uphold my side of the bargain. Take my hand, and get your stomach ready. Inside, it's all distorted and heaving, and it makes you ill. Just either keep your eyes closed or try to focus on your hand and don't let go for any reason. If I lose you in there, I'll never find you. Do you understand?"

"I understand," he replied, reaching out. As soon as he took Kyven's hand, his other hand flashed into his belt, and Kyven immediately yanked him into the shadow world. He stumbled and made a heaving sound as the disharmony of the shadow world assaulted his senses, dropping the pistol that had been in his hand. Kyven snatched it up and then took six broad steps, dragging Greggson along, then he converged another gateway as the *things* raced towards them and almost bodily threw Greggson through it even as he willed it to pass over him. He followed Greggson out and onto a cool, dry grassy field just outside a small village, where Greggson immediately fell to his knees and threw up noisily.

Kyven squatted down on his haunches as Greggson retched again, his expression neutral. "And so I hold up my side of the bargain, Gregg," he said easily, as Rainsong and several other Arcans started towards them from Vanguard. "Here, you'll be safe, and you won't have to worry about the Circle coming after you. It's not an Alamari or Flauren plantation as I first promised, but I think we're both allowed to lie to each other a little bit," he said lightly. "You can start your own farm here, if you really want to. Sister," he greeted as Rainsong bound up on all fours, then returned to a vertical base. "Could you have someone take this gentleman to the inn? I suggest you watch him fairly closely. He's not entirely friendly."

"Who is he?" she asked as Greggson looked up, his eyes widening.

"Councillar Greggson. I promised to help him escape from Avannar if he helped me, and well, here he is. He tried to kill me before I brought him, but it wasn't anything I wasn't expecting," he chuckled, holding up

Greggson's pistol, loaded with black crystal shot. "Inform Haven he's here and settle him in somewhere. Feel free to question him, but be gentle and be polite. After all, he *did* help us," he smiled, which made Greggson start screaming loud curses. "Once he accepts his position, let him go. He can either settle in somewhere here, or he can try to get back to Noraam." Kyven looked back to Greggson. "Welcome to Arcan territory, Gregggy," he said lightly. "You're about fifteen hundred minars from the closest human settlement. Now, you can either take up farming, start a trade, or head back for human civilization after the Arcans debrief you, it's entirely up to you. They won't stop you if you try to leave, and if you decide to become an honest man, I'm sure they can find you some good farmland somewhere."

"Bastard!" Greggson snarled, reaching into his belt again and producing a tiny knife like what would be used to break wax seals, the blade not even two fingerwidths long. Kyven took a single step back and prepared to disarm him, but before he could stop him, Greggson plunged the tiny blade into his own neck. He stiffened unnaturally and then fell to the grass.

"By the spirits!" Rainsong gasped, taking a few steps back. "A black crystal *knife*!"

"No, just poison," Kyven said after he rolled Greggson over and checked the man's pulse, but finding nothing. "A fairly potent one at that, I've never seen a man die that fast that wasn't black crystal. Oh well," he sighed. He opened his eyes to the spirits to see if Greggson had any other little surprises of an alchemical nature, and realized that Greggson was still there to his eyes. He wasn't dead, at least not yet. "Well," Kyven murmured as he looked at the man's body. He was very much alive, despite the fact that his heart wasn't beating. Kyven stripped him of his belt and the multiple alchemical devices he carried as a matter of custom, then took an alchemical necklace from him, making sure to drain it before setting it aside. He then put his hand on Greggson's face and brought himself in touch with his spirit, imagining the *poison* to be purged the same way he could purge a *disease*, then beckoned to the fox for the energy to cast the spell. She responded, a bit slyly, pleased that he was again trying to expand

his boundaries, and Kyven felt the poison in the man's body break down, attacked by his magic. Greggson took a reflexive breath and started to convulse, for his body had been without air for nearly two minutes.

"Nice try, Gregggy," Kyven said lightly, patting him on the cheek as his eyes opened, his pupils slowly starting to focus. "The poison was a clever idea. Too bad for you I can purge poisons with magic."

"Wha-Wha-What?" he panted, his wheezing slurring his words.

"Come now, do you think illusions are *all* I can do?" he asked with a quirky smile. "Help me strip him, sister. He may have other little surprises hidden in his clothes we can't see."

She gave him a sudden grin and nodded.

They stripped Greggson naked as other Arcans arrived, who bundled up his clothes and devices and carried them back to the village. A pair of very burly bear Arcans picked Greggson up off the grass, then carried him towards the village as he tried to struggle, but could barely move. The poison's shock to his system and the near-suffocation was making it hard for him to recover quickly. "Keep an eye on him, sister, he'll try to kill himself if you give him the opportunity."

"I will, brother. I'll send a message to Haven immediately and have them send someone to question him."

"Be thorough, he's a high-ranking Councillar. He knows almost *everything* they're up to."

"I'm sure someone who knows spells that can cause one to speak only the truth can be sent," she winked. "Sadly, I don't know that spell."

"Keep him away from me, I'll have nothing of the truth," he noted, which made her laugh. "I have to go, sister, I have things to do. Be careful and be well."

"You too, brother."

Kyven returned to the shadow world and noted that the *things* were staying close to where his gate appeared, but were again not moving, no doubt straining to try to sense him, wondering if it was a trick or if he had really invaded their world again. He created four different possible pathways away from the gateway, following the one back to Avannar himself, giving his adversaries more than one possible distortion to follow. It suitably confused them, caused them to break up as a few followed each distortion. But, once he was back at Avannar, he saw that the Circle had quit for the night.

And it was time to hunt.

The highest ranking Councillars spent most of their time on the top floors of the towers, in a kind of bubble inside their powerful grounders. It allowed them to use alchemy *inside* the effect, in an area the grounders didn't affect, depending on the enveloping anti-magic area to protect them from magical attack and checkpoint after checkpoint of guards to protect against mundane threats. But for Kyven, it was nothing but an open invitation, because it meant that he could get into those rooms.

It was almost too easy. Kyven waited for each Councillar to get busy enough to not be observant, converge a gateway behind them, then reach into the real world, grab them, yank them into the shadow world, then take a single step and throw them through another gateway. That gateway was nearly half a minar *over* the ranchland just west of Avannar, which meant that the last moments of those Councillars was spent screaming as the dark ground hurtled towards them...and it would be moments. It would take them quite a while to hit the ground from that high up. After dispatching the Councillar, he would then plunder the office, taking any papers that looked important and whatever alchemical devices that were laying around, drop them off at his camp, then go do it again.

It got trickier after he killed the highest ranking Councillars, for the guards noticed that the senior Councillars were missing, and they sounded the alarm and herded the rest of them into the grounded area...and that was pretty clever. Kyven couldn't get at them in there. The counterstroke for

Kyven was simply to reach into the room holding the huge grounding device, which could *not* be grounded to operate, and drain its huge red crystal, shutting down the device.

That stirred up the entire building. They knew immediately that the grounder had been disabled, and not two seconds later, a swirling disc of shadow appeared over the head of Councillar May, clawed hands reached out of it and grabbed her by her robe, and she was yanked screaming up into dark oblivion. Shots rang out as guards fired into the gateway even as it swirled closed, then Councillar Weathers screamed in fear when the floor under him just *vanished*, and he too was drawn into the dark disc, this time by gravity, chair and all.

The guards did react quickly and decisively. The officer in charge called for them all to pull their grounders. They reacted swiftly when another shadowy disc appeared, pointing the rods at it and causing it to evaporate before anything came out. The reaction was that the entire room plunged into inky shadow, what tiny bit they could see contorting and twisting in a manner that made a couple of the guards physically ill. One of the guards screamed in terror, and grounders were swung in that direction, the cone effect of the grounder almost acting like a lamp, boiling away the convulsing shadow. The screaming guard was very dead, his head very nearly completely severed from his body, a spray of blood on the wall behind him.

“Accept your fate,” ghostly voices came from all around them, from above, from the floor, whispering in their ears, screaming at the top of its lungs, a thousand voices all saying the same thing a different way. “Accept your fate...accept your fate....”

“First squad, focus the grounders on the Councillars!” the officer screamed, pointing towards the terrified rulers of the Loremasters. “Second squad keep searching for him! Sergeants, black crystal shot at the ready! We may only get one chance when he shows himself!” the officer barked, pulling a black painted pistol from the back of his belt.

Another guard screamed and a shot rang out, but it was one of the other guards that fell, a hole blown through the side of his head. Another grounder fell to the floor and didn't move, and when one of the patrolling guards swung his grounder over in that direction, they saw a grisly sight. The man that had been holding it was literally stuck to the wall, his chest and belly open and his organs in the act of falling to the floor with a wet plop, his eyes open and vacant and locked in an expression of pure terror.

"You have angered the spirits," the voices murmured and whispered and screamed and breathed all around them. "Accept your fate."

There was a hideous scream that made the Councillars flinch and shrink back towards the wall, then Councillar Terenton shrieked like a little girl when a thick line of blood and bits of flesh splattered a line across his face.

"Ghosts! It ain't no fuckin' Shaman, they gotta be ghosts!" one of the guards screamed in a hysterical voice, then he dropped his grounder, and to the horror of the Councillars, he ran across the room and dove out of the window. A window nearly ninety rods above the ground. His scream trailed away, but ended far too abruptly for him to be out of hearing.

The shadows vanished so suddenly it made most of them flinch, and one of the guards shouted and pointed. The black fox Shaman was standing in front of the door, a wicked smile on his face, his eyes glowing with an ominous emerald radiance. "Accept your fate," he murmured in a low, calm voice, bringing up his hand and pointing a clawed finger at the Councillars. Just about every guard turned their pistols and shockrods at the Shaman and opened fire, but the bullets and lances of lightning went right through his body and slammed into the door behind him, gouging pieces of wood and setting it afire in five places.

"It's a trick!" the officer cried, dropping his pistol and reaching for another. One of the guards screamed and turned his pistol at another guard and pulled the trigger, but the weapon was empty. "Coleson, stand down!" the officer barked, but the crazed guard drew his shockrod and pointed it at

the other guard, then activated it. The man screamed in agony as the shockrod blasted a charred hole in the center of his chest, causing him to stagger back and fall. “Trinity damn it, stand down! Stand down!” the officer screamed as another guard restrained the attacker.

“It was the Shaman! I kilt the Shaman!” Coleson protested as he struggled against the arms of the other. “Look, look, he’s dead! He’s dead, I kilt him! I kilt him! I ki—whu?” he said in confusion, looking at the dead man, smoke rising from his chest. He blinked owlshly, then paled when he realized he killed one of his own.

“The Shaman is using his illusions!” one of the Councillars barked. “He has to be in this room, Shaman must see what they’re affecting! He must be one of us!”

“But the grounders—“

“He must have found a way around them!” the Councillar shot back. “We need to get out of here!”

It was *almost* true. Kyven was actually sitting cross-legged in the room above, looking down through the floor with spirit sight, a pained smile on his face as blood spread red in the white fur of his right upper chest. One of the guards that had fired wildly at the gateway had gotten lucky and hit him, but strangely enough, the bullet lost a lot of its impact coming through the gate. The ball was just under the skin under his collarbone, just deep enough to hurt like a son of a bitch. He rolled sideways and onto all fours, literally dropping into the floor as he converged a gateway underneath him. Now that he got the officers to use their black crystal shot, he could engage them directly. He went right after that officer, yanking him down into the shadow world by a gateway under his feet, then opening another gateway and tossing him about thirty minars off the coast of the territories, in open ocean. The *things* were getting closer and closer, he could sense, unable to find him but sensing the gates and the brief presence of the men and women he dragged in and threw out in short order. Within the room, twenty gateways all converged at once, on the floor, the ceiling, the walls, in open

air, making the guards panic and fire their weapons in every direction, not using their grounders because they thought they weren't working. Only one was real, however, but that didn't stop every gateway from producing a single item. Everyone in the room stared blankly at the small iron balls that dropped down onto the floor with metallic *clanks*, a corded band around their circumferences which was blinking with magical lights in a rapidly increasing pattern.

"Annihilators!" someone shrieked in terror. The guards desperately turned their grounders on those balls, but there were twenty of them, and those that they spotlighted with their grounders simply vanished in a waver.

Luck was not with them

In a flash of magical light, everything within twenty rods of the *real* iron ball that was either alive or made of organic material simply *vanished* in a dull white flash, reduced to a fine white powder that drifted down to the floor. The effect killed all but three of the Councillars, and one of the dead was only *half* within the effect, which disintegrated only half of his body. The remaining half dropped limply to the floor in a near eruption of blood from open side facing the effect, along with the tinkling of metal dropping to the ash-strewn floor. The three remaining Councillars backed away from the effect as if it were still there, and one by one they vanished into the floor, into a gateway placed on the floor behind them. The guards screamed and pointed grounders at the last gateway, causing it to evaporate like mist, but nothing else happened.

They looked around, fearful, but nothing.

And nothing.

And nothing.

They all jumped when a disembodied voice regarded them dryly. "Relax, gentlemen. I got what I came for. Go have a drink on me. After tonight, you're gonna need it."

They flinched when a little leather pouch appeared out of little disc of shadow, and when it hit the floor, a few chits bounced out of the open mouth.

“Have a nice day,” the voice said pleasantly, then it was gone, leaving only the ceramic sound of a chit spinning to a stop on the stone floor.

“I thought you said you’d be careful!” Ebony barked when Kyven appeared, blood staining most of the white fur on his chest, appearing in the shadows at the edge of the fire’s light.

“So they got lucky,” he shrugged. “Just dig the bullet out and put a bandage on it, Ebony, I have more work to do.”

“I will *not*!” she gasped, putting her hands on his shoulders to steady him. “You need Shaman healing!”

“No, if I showed up at the army camp, the others would stick me in a bed or something. I have things to do, woman. Now patch me up and let me get it done. This is barely even a flesh wound. The bullet’s just under my skin, for the spirits’ sake!”

“How?” Lightfoot asked as she came up and gingerly touched the wound, which made him wince a little.

“One of them shot into the shadow gateway,” he replied. “The bullet lost most of its power coming through.” He gasped in pain when Lightfoot pinched the wound, and then she showed him a blood-streaked cylindrical bullet, not a musket ball, that had popped out under the pressure. “See, it’s barely a scratch,” he told Ebony, a little defiantly. “Now help me stop the bleeding and I’ll get back to work.”

Lightfoot held a bandage to his minor wound as Ebony stalked around the camp, muttering curses. “She’s a bit upset,” he mused to his small friend.

“She likes you,” she replied, holding her other hand on the back of his shoulder to apply pressure.

“Speaking of liking,” he mused, giving her a knowing smile. She swatted him lightly on the backs of his calves with her tail, which made him laugh. “I knew you wouldn’t last forever.”

“He’s going to Haven,” she grunted. “Whether he wants to or not.”

“Ah, so *that’s* how it is,” he grinned.

She glared shortly at him and jerked the bandage, making him wince.

“He won’t go, you know,” he warned, looking at where the young cat was sleeping by the fire.

“He *better*,” she growled.

“You know him better than that, my friend. He won’t leave you. And as long as you put yourself in danger, then so will he. He won’t be able to stand letting you go alone.”

“He *will*.”

“Lightfoot, he followed us halfway across the territories,” he chuckled. “Even if I took him all the way to Haven, I don’t think he’d stay there. He’ll just come back with the first supply caravan. That’s a very determined boy.”

“He will,” she growled again, looking at him. But when she did so, the hard edge in her eyes softened noticeably.

“Fraud,” he teased, then he gasped when she butted the palm of her hand against the bandage, then pulled it away and watched for a moment to see if any new blood stained his fur. “I take it I can go now?”

“You better, but be careful. This needs healing,” she warned, but she was smiling slightly. He leaned over and licked her muzzle fondly, then quite boldly reached down and patted her on her backside. She pushed him playfully, which made him chuckle and converge a gateway back into the shadow world.

Kyven made sure that by daybreak, Avannar was in total chaos.

Assassinating the entire Circle and all the Councillars was just one step, though it was definitely the most important one. The Circle commanded the Loreguard, after all. Kyven first crushed the head of the snake, then he followed up by finding and kidnapping three Loreguard generals, all of them important and high-ranking. Once he was done with that, he returned to the headquarters and set fires all over the sixth floor, forcing the Loreguard to rally to save the building.

But he didn't kidnap *all* of them. This war still had to happen, the Arcans had to fight to free themselves and earn their liberty...but that didn't mean that he wasn't allowed to stack the deck. He kidnapped the ones that would know the defensive plans, the things Kyven couldn't see in his reconnaissance missions, for he could only see emplacements and men, not intended plans of action. They'd interrogate the generals and find out what the Loreguard was planning, just as they'd interrogate Councillars Greggson, May, and Weathers, the only ones Kyven left alive, all of which were now in Vanguard under Rainsong's supervision.

By two hours after midnight, just about everyone in the walled half of Avannar was standing on those walls watching the island headquarters of the Loremasters burn, the sixth floor and four towers consumed in flame as the Loreguard and others feverishly labored to put out the fire.

While the Loreguard rushed to the burning main headquarters and tried to save it, Kyven went behind them and stole them blind. The conflagration wasn't just a political statement, it was also a very handy diversion, allowing him to plunder several Loreguard armories, steal yet more Briton rifles that had managed to reach the city, and a large number of shockrods and impact rods. It took him most of the night, and it also caused several near-misses with the *things* in the shadow world, who could sense the objects he was dragging into their world. Several times he was forced to hastily dump his booty through a gate and stay very still as the vaguely

humanoid *things* lurked around him, searching for him, or searching where they'd felt the disturbance. But so long as he remained stationary, they couldn't find him.

And that was when he saw something that was absolutely *critical*. One of the *things* that stalked around him, searching the area, wore the face of the man he'd thrown into the shadow world and left there to die. He remembered that face quite clearly, and he was absolutely positive that it was the same face as the man he'd dragged into the shadow world in the Pens, then allowed the *things* to kill him.

The implications of that were not lost to him. He could never do it again, nor could anyone else. If the people he brought in here and let the natives kill turned into *things* themselves after they were dead, perhaps souls trapped here in the shadow world, then they couldn't create more of them that they'd have to dodge later on. Kyven studied the shade after realizing who it was, trying to discern if it was different from the others, but it didn't look or sense any different than the others outside of one important feature; the shade of the Pens worker had an identifiable face, where the others did not, just amorphous heads with no features. The shade even had the ruined eye of the man he'd thrown in here, the one his posts knife had punctured. That heavily suggested to him that when the *things* killed someone, they turned the victim into one of their own. So, that meant that they couldn't use the shadow world as a convenient graveyard, else they'd populate it with so many *things* that it would be impossible to move within, even with their camouflage. After all, taking on the shadow form wasn't a foolproof means of evasion as it didn't hide it when they moved, nor did it hide the gateways they created or whatever real objects they brought in with them.

It made him ponder if the other *things* here were prior victims of his totem. If so, it would explain their hostility to living things beyond seeing them as food. He could sense their *hate* every time they approached, both their hate and their dreadful need.

By sunrise, he was done. In the confusion, he had tracked down and captured three key Loreguard generals, men he'd been keeping an eye on, three men that would know the Loreguard plan of defense for Avannar and also have detailed knowledge of Loreguard troop placements through Noraam. He had stolen more equipment and arms to both deny them to the enemy and supply his own side—Danna's army was still in dire need of equipment—and had surveyed the changes in the defenses they'd made since the last time he was there.

When he stepped out of the shadow of a large tree in the main camp of Danna's army, the guards immediately took note that he was there, and that dried blood stained the entire front of his chest, from his collarbone down to the base of his rib, turning his white fur a rust-colored red except near his collarbone, where it was bright red. The wound had reopened during the night, and he'd not had time to do anything about it. It still stung, but it hadn't bled fast enough for him to worry...but it also hadn't completely stopped bleeding. It would stop until he moved the wrong way, then bleed again for a little while.

"Shaman, you're wounded!" one of the guards almost screamed, dropping his musket and rushing over to him. That declaration brought quite a few Arcans out of tents, including a few Shaman.

"It's nothing," he said dismissively. "I have a lot to tell you guys," he said as Stalker was the first to reach him, the large wolf putting a tentative hand over the injury.

"Brother," Stalker said with simple dignity. "This is a minor wound, but you gave it no attention."

"I tried, but I didn't have much time, and I can't really put a bandage on it when I'm skulking around. No clothes or anything will meld into the shadow along with me."

"Well, it's easily healed. Come to the fire."

A guard quickly stirred the coals and got the fire going as Danna came out, gasped, and ran over. She was in her human appearance because he had the fur, and she was almost falling out of the skimpy robe she'd thrown over herself. "Rawr," he said lightly when she reached him.

"Don't show up here covered in blood and flirt with me, you jackass!" she said in hot concern, looking up at Stalker. "Is it bad?"

"A minor wound, barely a scratch," he replied. "Just in a place that wouldn't allow it to close with him moving around. I'll heal it as soon as he sits down."

"Thanks, brother. And I need to talk to you, Danna. I have a lot of news."

"Well, I think you can talk while Stalker heals you."

Stalker put him down on a log they'd dragged over where the old mining camps used to be. For some reason, Danna hadn't commandeered a house or taken a room in the inn there in Atan, she was still living in her tent. She was well behind what would be the initial front lines if the Loreguard attacked Atan, which was probably why they put her there. The other Shaman with Danna's army gathered around them as Stalker tended his wound, and he got straight to the point. "I killed the Circle last night," he declared.

"All of them?" Danna gasped.

"Anyone I didn't capture for interrogation," he replied, wincing a bit as Stalker pressed his hand over the wound. "I left three alive. They're in Vanguard right now, and Rainsong's watching them until Haven can send someone to debrief them. I also captured three Loreguard generals and sent them up there as well, they have a lot of information about the enemy army we can use. But the main thing is that I took out the leaders of the Loremasters. It should put them in total chaos by the time the armies attack. When are you going to move towards Avannar?"

“When DeVaur clears Riyan,” she replied. “We want to get there just as he does. None of us want the humans to see the Arcans coming and have time to get any ideas.”

“I’m quite impressed, brother. How did you get them?” Coldfoot asked. “I’ve been to their headquarters, I know how hard that had to be.”

“It wasn’t as hard as you think it was,” Kyven chuckled. “I’ve learned a couple of new tricks, brother. They let me bypass that huge grounding field and attack the field generator directly. Once that was out of the way, they didn’t have a chance. They didn’t believe anyone could attack them inside it, and I made them pay for it. Anyway, it’s going to take the Loremasters time to figure out how to move on. Someone’s gonna have to step up and take command, probably the Loreguard for the moment. I’d guess that one of their generals will probably end up in control, at least in the short term.”

“The lay Loremasters that have no idea what their leaders were up to will object to the Loreguard doing that,” Cloud mused. She was a dainty little ferret Arcan, very slender and petite, and was cute as a button.

“Which will add to the confusion,” Kyven nodded as the throbbing in his chest eased. “It’s what I do, sister. Sow discord.”

“And you do it so well,” she winked.

“When you have a talent, use it,” he shrugged. “Thanks, brother.”

“Any time, brother,” he replied, patting Kyven’s now healed chest. Kyven channeled the spell that stripped foreign matter out of his fur, leaving it white and pristine and black and glossy.

“I also captured some more supplies and equipment. I’ll bring some of it to you later today. I got Briton rifles, shockrods, impact rods, and some empty annihilators, unloaded ones. Given I also took all their black crystals, well, they won’t be all that hard to load.”

“Where are they?”

“Currently piled on a small island in the Podac river southeast of Avannar,” he replied. “I couldn’t take them very far, and besides, this was starting to get annoying,” he added, touching where he’d been injured.

“Any cannons?” Danna asked.

“It’ll be best to steal those right before the battle, so they don’t have a chance to replace them easily. But I *can* steal them,” he assured her.

“Good, because we really need those here. We’re not taking them to Avannar with us, we want them for the defense of Atan. We figure this will be the first mining village they attack after Avannar falls.”

“I don’t doubt that,” he agreed, putting his hand on his shoulder and moving his arm in wide circles at the shoulder, feeling no pain at all. The healing was complete and effective. “Thank you again, brother.”

Both he and Danna looked past the fire to see the shadows shift and shimmer under the same tree under which Kyven had appeared, to see Nightfall’s form emerge from the twisting shadow. She hurried right over to them and gave Kyven and Danna a toothy smile. “I figured it out,” she declared.

“Figured what out?” Stalker asked.

“How I do it,” Kyven said cryptically. “Congratulations, Nightfall.”

“And congratulations on you blessing,” Hardstep declared.

“You told them?”

“Of course I did,” Kyven smiled slightly. “Now comes the hard part.”

“And that is?”

“Making you go to Haven. You’re much too important to risk yourself now that you’re pregnant, my friend. I do need your help when we attack Avannar, but after that, you’re getting packed off to safety.”

“That will be the hard part,” she stated, which made a few of them chuckle.

Nightfall sat down with them as he went over what happened in Avannar that night, describing the scene in the council room where he manipulated the guards and Councillars into a position where he could kill most of them in one fell swoop. He didn’t exactly tell them that he terrorized them a little while doing it, using fear as a weapon against them, much as his spell that made one face his darkest fear was something he didn’t tell others he could do. But this was war, and he’d use every weapon he could get, no matter how sinister it made him look. He did, however, tell them about leaving the chits for those that survived after he got the last Councillar. Kyven had a reputation for things like that, and it would only reinforce that it was him that did it once word got out over what happened.

“Why didn’t you kill them all?” Stalker asked.

“I wanted witnesses that the Circle was killed,” he replied. “They’ll cover it up, of course, but word will still get out. If they don’t do it, *I* will. I want the populace to know that I killed the Circle. I want them to think *very* hard about that. After all, I’ve run amok in Avannar for most of the year, and now I just proved that *nobody* is safe in that city. If I can get to the Circle, I can get to anyone. I want whoever takes the place of the Circle to be looking over his shoulder every second of every day until the Loremasters are destroyed.”

“Well, that does make a sort of sense,” Sunny mused. She was a rather burly bear Shaman, named thus because of the gold of her fur and her pleasant disposition. She was one of the older Shaman.

“Who...who’s looking after things now?” he asked uncertainly. “With Firetail gone.”

“I am,” Sunny answered. “I’ve walked the path the longest among us, but it is by no means a position I want on a permanent basis,” she frowned. “I was never meant to be the Firetail.”

“You don’t *have* a tail,” Kyven said lightly, which made a few of them chuckle. “Alright, I’ll bring you the reports I’d been bringing to Firetail, Sunny.”

“What else is going on, Kyv?” Danna asked.

“Not much since my last report,” he replied, accepting a cup of water from a guard with a nod of thanks. “Danvers is approaching Riyan. He’ll stop and dig in before getting too close and wait for DeVaur to get there, then we’ll help them break through. The Loreguard won’t put much resistance up, they’re just there to try to slow DeVaur down and have orders to retreat to Avannar if he makes it across the river. After that, we’ll make our march on Avannar, coming right up Tobacco Road. We should make it faster for DeVaur if we’re going first to clear out any traps or ambushes.”

“How long will it take?”

“It’s about a hundred minars from Riyan to Avannar, so about ten days for DeVaur’s forces to march it,” he replied. “It’s also about the same distance between Avannar and Atan. If you want to try to arrive at the same time, I’d wait for about five days after they pass Riyan, given how much faster Arcans move.”

“What about at Avannar?”

“It’s a stalemate,” he replied. “The kingdoms won’t attack without DeVaur and the Georvans, and there’s too many of them for the Loreguard to try to sally out from Avannar and drive them off. So it’s a siege. The northern kingdoms are camped about two minars from the walls, and the Loreguard and shoring up the defenses of the walled section of the city. They’re abandoning the Trades district.”

“We have a few plans for that,” Danna said, looking at one of the Shaman, who nodded. “We can use that part of the city once we march in.”

“Well, you won’t find a standing building within five hundred rods of the river, they tore them all down,” Kyven replied. “I wouldn’t be entirely surprised if they weren’t planning to burn that half of the city, so the fire

and smoke makes it hard for DeVaur and the Georvans to march in and set up. We'll find out when the Shaman in Haven interrogate the generals I captured. I can look around and see fortifications, but they don't let me see the Loreguard's *plans*. I can just guess at what they might do based on what I see, and well, I'm no general," he shrugged. "Usually I just tell Danvers everything and he makes the guesses. Most of the time, he's right." He took a drink of water. "Have the villagers calmed down yet?"

"A little, at least those still here," Danna said wryly.

"Well, I guess I should go drop in on Timble and the apprentices while I'm here," he said, standing up. "Cause I really need to get back. No doubt they're all wondering where I am, I said I'd be back by sunrise," he chuckled.

"I'll come with you," Nightfall offered.

"Me too, I like Timble," Danna replied.

"I need to give you back the fur, Danna," he warned, touching his amulet. "Though I'm sure you didn't mind getting to go all night without it."

"I was cold," she grunted, which made him chuckle. He willed the change, and again he felt like his bones had melted into icewater. He shivered after it was over, then covered himself in an illusion that he was wearing a simple white cotton shirt and a pair of denim jeans, with sturdy boots on his feet. Danna stretched, making a few Arcans wince when her back popped loudly, then she shivered her tail and gave him a look.

"Well, let's go. I don't have much time," Kyven declared, leading the two females towards the village.

Chapter 20

Ebony had more or less gotten over it by the time he got back to camp, which was already packed and ready to move, though she looked quite a bit unsettled until he appeared from a disc of swirling shadow that manifested itself under a tree at the edge of their tiny clearing, and that was probably because when he dismissed the illusion after coming through, his chest was healed. He went straight for his clothes as she rushed over to him, putting her huge clawed hand on his chest and patting it, then nodding as he leaned down for his pants. “Quiet night?” he asked.

She nodded. “Have you eaten?”

“I ate at my old shop before coming back,” he replied. “I had a long night. And no, I didn’t get any sleep.”

She gave him a stern look. “It can’t be healthy, Shaman. You never seem to sleep at all!”

“I’ll catch up after the war’s over,” he told her, pulling his pants up. “We’re going to wait here for the army, at least unless Wilson has some other plans for us. I’ll get some sleep while we wait. Lucky!” he called.

“He’s out scouting,” Ebony told him. “He went with Lightfoot.”

“Then they’re not scouting,” he snorted, which made her chuckle. “Well, can you track down my talker please? Lucky usually keeps track of stuff like that.”

“It’s in your saddlebag. I’ll get it for you.”

He got his shirt back on by the time she returned, and he turned it on and pressed the button. “Wilson,” he called.

“It’s Dancer, my brother,” came the hasty reply. “Give him a moment, he’s shaving.”

“Well, he can listen,” he said, sitting down by the fire. “Last night I killed off the Circle,” he reported. “All but three of them. Those are at Vanguard, and the Shaman in Haven will interrogate them. I also captured three Loreguard generals so we can get some information on their plans for Avannar’s defense.”

“You made him cut himself,” Dancer laughed. “Hold on, I need to heal him.”

Kyven laughed and waited, petting Sirra when she padded out of the forest and laid down beside him. “Hey girl, where’s Dauro?” he asked. In reply, the larger of the two Lupans also came out of the woods, carrying a dead buck deer by the neck. “Oh,” he chuckled, patting her on the neck.

“Don’t ever tell me something like that when I’m shaving, Kyven!” Danvers complained, which made him laugh. “I almost cut my own throat!”

“Sorry,” he replied into the alchemical device. “Well, that about sums up my night, Wilson. I doubt the city’s fallen apart yet, the bureaucracy is still there and running, but by the time we get there, it should be pretty chaotic. There’s bound to be a power struggle over who takes over for the Circle, so things will be messy by the time we attack. Outside of that, I also raided some more supplies and equipment that I’ll be taking back to Danna’s army after I get some rest. I visited Danna and the army before I came back and told her everything. We’ll just have to wait and see what the Shaman learn from the Councillars and the generals I captured.”

“I’ll need to get in touch with Danna and discuss things with her,” Danvers mused through the device. “What did you take?”

“More Briton rifles, shockrods, impact rods, and empty annihilators,” he replied.

“We can use some of the impact rods. Drop a couple of crates of them off here and take the rest to Danna.”

“Can do. If you don’t mind, Wilson, I’d like to just wait where we are for you to get here,” he said. “I’m a little tired. I had a long night.”

“After what you did, yes, I think you’d be tired,” Danvers chuckled. “Go ahead and settle in and rest today. I’ll need you to scout Riyan tonight, but until then, get some rest, and good work, Kyv.”

“Thanks. I’ll call back in when I wake up.”

“Get some rest.”

The shadows of an elm twisted into a circular gateway, and Nightfall stepped out of it. She was nothing but a silhouette and almost impossible to see with the shadow gateway behind her, at least until the shadow bled away and left her as she normally appeared. “I heard what Danvers said,” she told him. “Where did you hide the supplies? I can move them for you while you sleep.”

He yawned. “Well, if you can find them, sure,” he replied, waving his hand as his eyes glowed with an emerald radiance. A pictorial map of Avannar and its surroundings appeared between them, facing Nightfall. Kyven could see it as well, but everything was backwards, reversed. “Alright, it’s on this island,” he pointed to a small island southeast of the city, close to the south bank of the river. “There’s a huge oak tree on that island, dominates the entire thing, the crates are stacked under it. Can you read?”

She shook her head.

“Alright, the impact rods are in a case marked like this,” he said, creating another illusion showing **IMPACT ROD** as it appeared stenciled on the sides of the crates. “Think you can remember that?”

“Of course I can. Can someone teach me to read?”

“I’m sure someone can,” Kyven told her. “I can if I have the time, but I know all the Shaman can read, and so can many humans. Take two or three crates back to Wilson and take everything else to Danna.”

“I’ll take care of it, Kyven.”

“How’s Toby doing?”

She knew what he meant. “He’ll learn it if only to make me shut up,” she said a touch smugly, which made him laugh.

“You’re riding him?”

“Ceaselessly,” she smiled slightly.

“Well, I’ll pile on when we rejoin the army,” he grinned. “I’m going to need both of you when we attack Avannar.”

She didn’t turn, but she did something that Kyven thought was amazingly clever, something he’d never thought of. She had the gateway appear horizontally, standing on it with the gateway under her feet, but instead of falling through it, she had the *gateway* move, sliding up her body smoothly and quickly, consuming her. The gateway evaporated after it went over her head.

That was a trick he *had* to learn.

He yawned again and stood up, then went over to his gear and pulled out his bedroll. “Alright, you mother hen, I’m going to take a nap,” he told Ebony. “Wake me up if something important happens.”

“If I think it’s important enough,” she declared, putting her hands on her hips and giving him a steely look.

He chuckled and spread his bedroll by the small fire, and Sirra slid over and laid down half beside him, half on top of him after he climbed in. Her warmth and her reassuring presence combined with his bone weariness, far more exhaustion than he even let Ebony see—for fear she’d lock him in a cage or something—and he fell almost immediately asleep.

He knew it was a dream almost immediately, because he didn’t feel tired at all. He was standing on a gentle hill that had a solitary tree at the

very top, surrounded by an absolute sea of waving grass, kissed by a warm, gentle wind. The sun was high in the sky, casting dappled shadow across the shorter grass under the tree, some kind of fruit tree from the look of the bulbous amber fruits hanging among the leaves and branches. Far in the distance, a series of black dots moved across the green ocean of grass, a herd of deer or elk or maybe even bison. It looked like the vast prairies that Clover had described to him, which lay west of the Great Snake River, nestled between the river and the Ice Mountains far to the west.

Kyven sat down and rested his back against the tree, enjoying the breeze and the rustle of the leaves above, almost bemused by the peace of the scene before him...but then something curious happened. A dirt scar appeared in the grass of its own volition, traveling across the base of his little hill, eating away the grass as it traveled in a direction he preferred to call west. The dirt scar then solidified to a road, and while he saw no travelers, footprints, hoofprints, and wagon tracks appeared in the dirt as if made by invisible travelers, appearing and then fading away like footprints in sand at the beach, washed away by the waves. Bemused, he watched the road widen, watched more and more prints appear and then vanish, and then the road became a corduroy road, logs laid in the roadway and covered with dirt to prevent the roadbed from eroding down into the prairie. The road then turned gray, covered in strange rock, and that rock expanded, widened, became a highway that twenty horses could canter along side by side. In the distance, along the road, a little village appeared, the houses building themselves with surprising speed, but again, he saw no people. The houses built themselves, looking new and pristine, then they weathered as he watched, the boards faded, were painted over, the paint eroded and chipped, then the houses vanished and new ones took their places. The little hamlet grew over the moments, becoming a cozy little village, then a bustling town, then it was a city of many blocks, the houses slowly evolving, taking new shapes, becoming larger. Bricks replaced wood, stone blocks replaced bricks, strange strips of metal replaced the blocks, even as thatch was replaced by slate which was replaced by wooden shingles which was replaced by thin black overlapping squares. Large buildings of stone appeared that had metal skeletons, the skeletons raising up from the earth

and then covered in stone, each building reaching higher than the last, going story after story after story higher into the air. The town became a city, a huge city, expanding its boundaries even as the buildings at its heart rose higher and higher into the air, some almost impossibly high, reaching for the single puffy cloud high above....

And then it was gone. The outlying buildings crumbled away, the stones of the huge buildings melted away slowly, until they too vanished. The grass reclaimed the city, and after mere moments, it was as if it had never been there. The herd animals returned, ambling lazily across the ground upon which that huge metropolis had once stood.

"What did you see, my Shaman?" the voice of his totem drifted into his ears. She padded up beside him and sat down, wrapping her tail around her legs, looking to where the city had once stood.

"I think it was the Great Ancient Civilization, appearing and then disappearing as if I could see the whole thing in the march of just a few moments.

"And what does it mean to you?"

He looked up at the tree, which appeared exactly as it had when he first arrived. The tree was the same, the grass was the same, the sky was the same.

"That nothing is as permanent as we may want to believe it is," he replied, looking back to the grassy prairie below. "The Great Ancients certainly must have believed that their time would never end." He sighed. "How did it happen, sister? How could they all just vanish? And how did it reach all across the world? I went to Eusica, and their village was like ours. Shouldn't they have been spared? After all, the Breach happened *here*."

She glanced at him. *"The Great Ancients had thousands of years of development of their tools and technologies,"* she told him. *"One of their most important technologies was the harnessing the power of lightning as a power source for their devices. They called it electricity, and had learned to*

gain complete control over it. This technology was the foundation and backbone of their entire society. When they created the breach into the spirit world, the explosion created a wave of force that spread across the entire world, and whatever it touched that used their electricity, it destroyed. Without the foundation of their society, every nation and kingdom on the planet fell, and in something of a cruel irony, those nations and kingdoms who were the most powerful and technologically developed suffered the most. Billions died, my Shaman, but they did not die in war. They died of starvation. So utterly dependent were they on their electricity that without it, the population of humans on this world went from nearly seven billion to only perhaps one hundred million. Noraam itself went from three hundred and fifty million before the war to barely more than a million afterward. Most of those that survived were in the center of the continent, on land much like this, but migrated eastward not long after the Breach due to severe drought that forced them to either move or die. They settled on the east coast, where the rains still fell, joined the survivors who were already there, and Noraam grew from their settlements.”

Kyven digested that, leaning back against the tree, trying to imagine some *seven billion* people starving to death. The chaos, the fear, the insanity in their towns, it must have been utter madness as starving, desperate people struggled to find food, fought each other, killed each other over the smallest scraps...perhaps, at the end, even ate each other since there was no other food to eat. “So, our ancestors destroyed the world,” he breathed.

“Often it is thus that those who bring doom upon others do not understand the consequences of their actions until it is too late,” she told him evenly.

“What happened to, you know, the enemies? The ones across the sea?”

“As Noraam fell, so did they,” she replied. “If it means anything to you, what few survived the Breach died of pestilence and the aftereffects the Breach caused, mainly drought from the disruption of the planet’s weather caused by the Breach. There is not even a Noraam to replace what once was for them. Everything they were is gone, lost forever. Those that live on their

lands are not the descendents of that ancient foe. They are extinct. It is the darkest irony. They attacked Noraam out of a lust to be the most powerful nation in the world, but in so doing, they ended up setting into motion a sequence of events that destroyed their technological world and annihilated their entire civilization."

"I take no solace in a tragedy," he sighed. "It must have been even worse for them, since their soldiers were over here. The soldiers died alone, and their families died without them."

"Much as many good and honest men in the Loreguard fight unawares of the true motives of their leaders, those ancient humans fought only because they were deceived by their leaders into believing their war was just, when in reality, it was they who instigated the war in the first place. In many ways, their common soldiers were no different from the Arcans they learned to fear towards the end of the war. Both simply fought because they were told to fight." An Arcan seemed to waver into view before him, but it was like no Arcan he'd ever seen before. He was a brown-furred canine Arcan, tall, burly, powerful, looked quite grim. He was dressed in a strange jacket and trousers that were like camouflage, browns and greens and blacks and tans mottled together in random blots and patches, with pieces of similarly painted armor laid over his clothing, held together with black straps. He carried a weapon that looked vaguely like a rifle, but it had a strange black casing around the barrel, and there were little alchemical lights flashing on the side. What looked like annihilators were hooked on a bandolier across his chest. The pads of his feet were bare, but he had what looked like armor wrapped around his upper foot all the way to his ankle. A strange greenish piece of square glass was resting over his right eye. It was one of the original Arcans created during the war that destroyed the Great Ancient Civilization, created to fight, to be a soldier. On his shoulder on that strange jacket were blocky letters he could make out as an archaic form of Noravi, the letters **RCS** emblazoned in red on a black patch.

"What do you see?"

“I see the past returning to us again, like a great circle,” he said after a moment of studying the unmoving apparition. “The Arcans must become what they used to be, must return to their roots. They must be warriors again. It’s the only way they’ll ever earn the right to be free.”

“*What do you see?*”

He glanced at her, then sat up and studied the apparition more carefully. The Arcan looked...unhappy. The expression on his face, it was grim, but it was...was...it was *resigned*. This Arcan knew he was going to die, yet he was obviously going to fight anyway. Was he fighting of his own volition, or was he fighting else his own creators would destroy him if he didn’t?

“I see a slave,” he said quietly. “An Arcan fighting because he has no other choice.”

She glanced at him, and another Arcan appeared. This one was much smaller, a female ferret Arcan, wearing a much less, well, aggressive kind of uniform. It was all white, long-tailed jacket with a white shirt under it and white pants, and there was a red cross emblazoned on the sleeve of her white jacket under her patch, this one red on a white background and reading **RCN** rather than RCS.

RCN. In a flash of insight, somehow he just *knew* that was how the Arcans got their name. Much as the names on that map Danvers had shown him of Noraam during the Great Ancient Civilization, he just *knew* that those letters, RCN, had evolved to become the modern name, the Arcan. Those letters stood for something else, of that he was sure, but it was the letters themselves that had become the name for the Arcan race.

From the look of her, she looked like a healer or doctor of some kind. This was an Arcan that wasn’t created solely to fight, he mused. He remembered his spirit telling him that at the end, the Great Ancients were putting anyone that couldn’t fight into that machine and sacrificing them to create Arcans, even using infants, converting their non-combatant population into soldiers. But at what cost? If an entire generation was

sacrificed to the machine...well then, what would happen after the war was over, and that missing generation had no children to continue the human race? *"What do you see?"*

"I'm not sure," he said honestly. "I see an Arcan created by the Great Ancients, but *not* as a warrior. Maybe...maybe she was the start of what became slavery," he said in a pondering tone. "This Arcan was created to serve a purpose, but after the war, the humans got so used to being *served* by the Arcans that they decided to *enslave* them when their civilization collapsed and the purpose she once served no longer existed."

"What do you see?"

Kyven studied this new apparition, so much a contrast compared to the first. The soldier looked grim, fatalistic, but this ferret, she had a slight smile on her face. She seemed, well...*happy*. Well, maybe not happy, perhaps more like content. No, it wasn't that. Looking at the soldier and this healer side by side, he saw the roots of the Arcan race. A soldier that would evolve into a mule, a workhorse, and an Arcan that would fight for the amusement of his masters, side by side with a smaller Arcan who would eventually be a field worker and servant...and the attitudes that each Arcan held before the Great Ancient Civilization collapsed and they became what man would make out of them in the future. He saw both the grim fatalism of the Arcans in bondage, and the hope of those that were free...and the spark of hope lurking in the hearts of those still in a collar. "I see the beginning," he breathed.

"Sometimes, Shaman, one must look to the beginning in order to know how something must end," she intoned calmly. *"Sometimes, Shaman, one must look at his tracks in the snow and see where he has been in order to know where he is going."* She looked at him, her eyes twin pools of emerald radiance, calm and confident. *"Remember well what I have taught you about the past, my Shaman. Soon, you must use it to set the course of the future. It is by your hand that the future of Noraam shall be guided."*

"Me? Alone?"

“Ever as it should be,” she said simply, looking back out across the prairie. “The others do not see the whole prairie before us, my Shaman, where you can. You have seen the march of time upon the grass, where they have not. You have seen the truth, and you understand what it means far better than even the other Shaman. They cannot see. But you see. When the time comes, my Shaman, you will know what to do. As you have known what to do ever since I released you from your Walk, even without me telling you what must be done. You have pleased me, Kyven Steelhammer of the shadow fox. You are truly my Shaman.”

“I thought you didn’t care about anything but my obedience,” he said dryly.

She gave him a wolfish, toothy smile, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. *“And you believed me? You still have much to learn,”* she said teasingly, the dappled shadows of the tree starting to shift and concentrate around her, causing her form to blur in the growing darkness, until only her glowing eyes were easy to discern in the shifting shadows and darkness. *“Remember what I have shown you, my Shaman. Use it wisely.”*

And then she was gone.

Kyven sighed and leaned back against the tree. It was quite peaceful there, with the warm sun and gentle breeze, the rustling of the leaves, and the shifting of the grass as the wind pulled at the stalks and blades, like waves in the sea. He pulled a stalk of grass from the ground beside him and started chewing on the light green, pulpy end, tasting the coolness and purity of the grass, then he put his hands behind his head and just looked out over the prairie. It was a beautiful day, and he felt like staying a while.

Kyven roused from sleep and found himself under the canvas of his tent, hearing the rain pattering against its sturdy, waterproof top. The flaps of the small, one-man tent were open, and a turn of his head showed him that the other tents were erected around the soggy stones ringing the firepit, each flap open in the muggy, warm late summer day. It was hard to tell

what time it was with the clouds blocking the sun. They must have set up his tent and put him in it without ever waking him up, so they must have thought he was completely exhausted.

He sat up, put his elbows on his knees, and pondered the dream. It was more a vision than a dream, like the one he'd had when he nearly died in the Black Keep, but this one was much gentler...but it was no less important or poignant. It seemed that the most important lessons were taught thusly, where the shadow fox showed him things and allowed him to use his own insight to puzzle out what she intended him to know...and also make choices. He had chosen between life and death the last time he had a vision like that, and he knew it. The fox had offered him release and would have thought no less of him had he taken it, yet he had chosen to live, to continue to serve her and the Arcans, because he was *needed*.

He knew that she had offered him another choice in this vision, but he couldn't quite see what choice it was. But he had made a choice.

He looked over to the tent across from his, and saw Lightfoot and Lucky laying in it, on their bellies and side by side, Lightfoot looking quite satisfied with herself as Lucky played with her bone white hair. She had her eyes closed, then she shifted a little when Lucky leaned down and whispered something to her, shifted and smiled without looking at him. She really did love him, Kyven mused, but Lightfoot being Lightfoot, she never *said* anything. But, Lucky wasn't stupid. He had no doubt how she felt about him now, which was why he was being so intimate, almost kittenish with her. Lucky was acting like a lover, not like a young boy determined to win the woman he had his cap set for. Lightfoot had led him on a long and grueling chase, but he had conquered her, and now he got to enjoy the spoils of that victory...and one of them was tousling Lightfoot's hair and whispering naughty things in her ear, acts that would probably get any other male killed.

Well, except for Kyven. She'd let him do things like that to her, but that was because they were friends and he was a Shaman.

In Lightfoot, he could see the roots of the Arcan race. Those first ones, he imagined, were probably much like she was. Skilled, deadly, but terse, and in their ways, grim. Lightfoot was not a *happy* person. She was a realist, and she knew that her role in the scheme of things was to fight for her people because many could not fight for themselves. It was what she did best, so it was what she did for her people, and did willingly. She was a hard woman to know, but once you got to know her, you felt your life richer for her friendship.

It made him miss Danna a little bit.

A dark shadow appeared behind him, then Nightfall flopped onto her belly beside him in his tent. "I thought you'd be awake," she declared. "I finished moving those boxes for you, Kyven. Danna has all but the ones I took to Danvers."

"Any trouble?"

"None," she replied. "It's raining here too," she said disapprovingly. "I hate getting my fur wet."

"I know, it takes forever to dry," he agreed. "Did you look around Avannar?"

"Of course I did," she smiled slyly, glancing at him. "The city's running around like a kicked anthill. Everybody's all kerfluffled."

Kyven laughed. "Who taught you that word?"

"One of the soldiers. He said it means all confused and disorganized. That *is* what it means, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, it just sounds a little funny hearing you use it, that's all," he replied with a smile.

"Why is that?"

"It's just a seldom used word, and if you think about it, it sounds funny," he replied.

“A lot of human words sound funny,” she replied. “And I kinda like kerfluffled.” She nudged him. “Now show me how you make shadows solid. I want to study it a little.”

“Still trying?”

“I *will* figure it out,” she declared adamantly.

They spent nearly an hour, as Kyven demonstrated solid shadows to her and they talked. He rather liked Nightfall, found her to be fun to talk to, fun to teach, because she was so earnest about wanting to learn about anything and everything. The instructions devolved into gossip after a while, though, as Nightfall told him all the naughty things about Toby, and he opened up a little about Danna and their complicated relationship. The fun ended, however, when his talker beeped. “Kyven,” he said after fishing it out of the tent.

“Alright, friend, we’re probably a couple of hours behind you now. Are you rested?”

“Rested and ready, Wilson. What do you need me to do?”

“Go to Riyan and get us a detailed report on all artillery and troop emplacements. And I want you to go to where the canal ends and think up some way to stop them from moving those troops when they retreat, but don’t do it until I give you the order.”

“Want me to sink the barges?”

“You only have to sink *one*, Kyven, and that’s the one in front. Sink that one, the rest can’t get around it,” he replied. “If we can stop those troops from reaching Avannar before we do, that’s that many fewer enemies we have to fight.”

“But then they’ll be behind us.”

“No, they’ll be out of play,” Danvers replied. “When they retreat to the barges and find them sabotaged, that’s when we’re going to attack them *there*. We should be able to capture the entire garrison.”

“Ah. Good idea.”

“Thank you, I do try,” he replied with a chuckle.

“Alright, give me a couple of hours, Wilson. I’ll find you and tell you what I discovered.”

“Be careful out there, my friend.”

“Always am,” he replied, then put the talker away.

“Want some help, Kyven?” Nightfall asked.

“If you want to come,” he shrugged, getting up on his knees and working on the laces of his shirt. “Ebony!”

“I heard, Shaman,” she replied from outside the tent...that fool female was standing out in the rain! “We’ll strike the camp and go back to the army.”

“I was about to suggest that very thing,” he agreed, pulling his shirt over his head. “Have Lucky get Vasha ready, just in case I need her.”

“I’ll have her saddled and ready, Kyv,” Lucky called from the other tent; he forgot they were right there.

“Good man. Sirra, Dauro, I’m leaving!” he called. “Go with Ebony!” He sat down and wriggled his pants off, then put his hand on his amulet and willed the change. He endured the feeling like his bones had turned to ice, then he shivered once he was wearing the fur, slashing his tail a few times. He infused himself with the essence of the shadow, turning his body into a dark silhouette, and saw Nightfall’s appearance bleed away to darkness as well. “I’ll be at the army in a couple of hours, guys. I’ll see you there. Be careful heading back.”

“We will,” Ebony answered. Kyven gestured, causing a disc of swirling darkness to appear under both him and Nightfall, but he did *not* allow it to pull him into it. He copied Nightfall’s trick, moving the disc

instead of himself, causing it to rise up and swallow both of them, sending them into the shadow world.

“Alright, let’s get started,” he said as he floated up, and then stood on nothingness, automatically taking note of where every single *thing* was within his ability to sense.

The fortifications at Riyan were considerable. The low ridges north of the city were bristling with cannons, looking down over the river, and they had about 10,000 men there to stall DeVaur’s hundreds of thousands. That may have seemed suicidal, but those men were in trenches, a very complex trench system that let them move for nearly two minars about 300 rods behind the riverbank without presenting a target, as well as trenches leading to the northwest, to where the barges would be waiting to ferry them to Avannar. Nightfall went to investigate the south side of the river as Kyven went up and took a closer look at the cannons, lurking in the shadow world as he listened to the men manning those guns talk, even as he counted artillery pieces...and found something curious. Only about a fifth of them were *real*.

It was quite a clever trick. They had shaped pieces of wood painted black to appear to be real cannons, and fucking *big* ones, there just to scare DeVaur into thinking twice about trying to cross the river. There were nearly 300 cannons bristling along the three low ridges overlooking the river, but only about 60 of those cannons were real, and those were small and in poor condition, clustered mainly on the west side of the formation with about 10 in the center and 10 to the east. Small cannons, easy to transport for when they retreated. The rest of them were fakes, there to look intimidating and give DeVaur pause when he looked through his field glasses and saw that long line of cannons staring down at his men.

Guile and deceit. Kyven could appreciate that.

Alchemically, they had two weapons that Kyven saw might cause problems. One was a repeller, set with the infantry near the west side of their trenchworks, hidden in a pit they’d dug with camouflage over it and an

earthen ramp for dragging it out to use, and the other was an alchemical death machine in the center of the formation. It was a deathfog device, which created a cloud of black mist that killed anything it touched. That was a *very* dangerous device to use so close to their own men, because a shift in the wind could wipe out one's own army. But, if they just turned it on and fled, the death fog would linger as long as the machine had energy, and conceivably stall DeVaur for *hours* waiting for the device to consume its crystals.

That thing had to be taken out first if any attack was going to succeed in a reasonable amount of time.

So, going on what Danvers had taught him about tactics, the death machine was a staller, but the repeller was probably there to cover the men as they retreated when DeVaur finally got across the river. The cannons would scare DeVaur into thinking twice about attacking, but he really had no choice, because the river was unfordable east and west of Riyan. DeVaur had to come across right where they'd set their trenchworks, but the Loreguard commander wouldn't be so foolish as to believe that DeVaur wouldn't have something up his sleeve. He'd *expect* some kind of flanking attack by a small skirmish force that managed to get across the river somehow, so that meant he had to have mobile troops in position to respond.

Kyven found them after about ten minutes of searching. The commander had nearly 200 cavalry troops hidden about halfway to where the canal ended, who would be the men the commander would call if the artillery emplacements somehow got flanked.

Hell, that was 200 more horses for their army, as far as he was concerned.

He went on to survey the canal. The end was surrounded by warehouses, and there were wooden docks lining the canal sides for nearly a minar from the end of the canal. The water level in the canal looked higher than normal, no doubt because of the rain. They had a whole lot of

barges there, all lined up and ready, with dozens and dozens of mule pull teams ready to start hauling them. There was a force of about 200 Loreguard infantry there to defend the barges, dug in behind trenches and fortifications and ready to repel attackers, a wise move on the commander's part. The barges themselves were square-hulled vessels that were fairly large and had a shallow draw, half of them with a deck over the cargo area to create a flat area on top for more cargo, looking to carry several hundred men in each one. The lead barge was an open-hulled barge that didn't look quite large enough to block the entire canal if it sunk, but Danvers said that it would, so he'd believe Danvers. The canal was designed so barges could travel two abreast with enough room for them to pass each other safely, allowing cargo to move in both directions on the canal without interruption.

Nightfall approached him as he studied the cargo terminal, dropping down onto all fours and becoming still as both of them watched one of the *things* slowly float by, almost patrolling, searching for them. It moved off a distance after a few moments, then Nightfall moved beside him. "I looked over the south bank," she told him. "They built a huge pile of stuff out of the houses and buildings they torn down that runs along the south bank. I think it's to make it hard for the men to get to the river. There are no men on that side, but there are a lot of holes in the ground and other things. I think the Loreguard men were building traps."

"It would be the smart thing to do, but building that barricade just gives DeVaur's men cover once they reach it. That doesn't seem too smart," Kyven replied. "Go back to Wilson and tell him I'll be there in about ten minutes or so. I'll go check out those holes and meet you back at the army."

"I will. Be careful, friend," she said, leaning over and licking his cheek, then quickly vanishing into the gloom of the shadow world.

Nightfall was right. The Loreguard had built quite a few traps on the south bank of the river, several areas where it looked like they'd start fires, a few pits dug across the road and covered over with sticks and leaves and dirt, and there were several annihilators set to activate if someone tripped the thin ropes and strings connected to blocks holding down their safety

switches; they'd already been turned on but the safety switches depressed, which meant that the device would start its countdown to activation as soon as the switch was released. That was how a soldier could arm the device but hold it safely until he had an opportunity to throw it. He didn't find every single one of them, but he found enough to be sure that they'd been pretty thorough about trapping the road and the forest approaching Riyan, as well as the rubble on the south bank where they'd torn down buildings to build makeshift barricades along the south bank of the river.

He also saw why they built that wall there. It wasn't a wall so much as it was about a five rod tall pile of debris, jagged and treacherous, and it was laid right up against the south shore of the river. A man would have to very carefully pick his way over it to get to the river, then he couldn't easily retreat once he was there. Not only was it an open area that he had no doubt the cannons had already been calibrated to fire upon, it also gave the Loreguard infantry on the north bank, who had clear fields of fire on the river, easy shots on men who couldn't move quickly, nor could they retreat. Once a man hit the river, he had to cross it quickly, or he was a dead man.

And more; he realized that the levee-like pile would trap the mist of the deathfog machine over the river, making it virtually impossible to traverse if it was turned on. That death fog was heavier than air, so it would pile up against that barricade and spread along the river itself.

And if that wasn't bad enough, them firing cannonballs down into the debris would create lethal clouds of deadly shrapnel over and above the cannonballs themselves, since that debris was loosely packed and would allow a cannonball to penetrate before the explosive force sent shrapnel flying.

The Loreguard were ready for them.

Kyven stepped out of the shadows in front of Strider and several other horses holding Danvers' command staff and a few Shaman, Clover among them. He nodded to Nightfall and Toby as they approached. "It's gonna be ugly, Wilson," Kyven told him immediately. Using illusions, Kyven showed

Danvers everything he'd seen, locating it on an illusory map, and describing the barricade of debris on the south bank as well as the many traps they'd set in front of it, stressing how they set the death machine to use the debris to spread its death fog over a wider area that also defended the river itself.

"Needless to say, Kyv, taking out that death machine is your primary responsibility," Danvers said as he looked over the map carefully. "Alright, here's what we're going to do. We're going to attack the canal terminal and take it, which relieves Kyven of the need to block it off. The Shaman will prevent them from using talkers to warn the others, and our Arcans can stop any runners they send. We'll work our way back to them from the north, ambush their cavalry, then attack the artillery from behind, then use what cannons they have to shell their own trenches. DeVaur's men will have to deal with the traps and the levee of debris themselves, but we should have them seriously out of position with us raining cannonballs down on their unfortified rear ends and allow them to get over the river with minimal resistance."

"Simple but effective," one of his officers nodded.

"Alright, Kyv, take that back to DeVaur and warn him what's in front of him," Danvers told him with a nod. "And tell him about those barges, he might want to send some of his own men ahead on them," Danvers chuckled. "Tell him that we'll attack at three hours after midnight exactly, and with this cloud cover and a quarter moon, it's going to make it even harder for them to stop us. Not unless every man in their army has night spectacles," he said with a smile.

"It's even going to be dark for *us*, General," Dancer chuckled. "But we'll make due."

DeVaur was relatively easy to find, since he had such a grand pavilion tent filled with elegant furniture, complete with gourmet food prepared by his personal chef. He was enjoying dinner with his staff officers when Kyven melted out of the shadows behind his chair, still in his Arcan form.

“*Mei Diau!*” one of his officers cried as Kyven stepped up behind DeVaur’s chair, silent as a ghost.

“Shaman,” DeVaur said simply, doing his best not to look surprised one little bit. He even took a bite of his sauce-smothered pork.

“I looked over Riyan,” he told the tent. “They’re definitely going to make it interesting for you, and Danvers sent me to tell you his intentions.

“Proceed.”

Using illusions, Kyven showed DeVaur the layout of the fortifications of Riyan, stressing the debris pile and the kill zone it was intended to create, as well as the numerous traps set on the south side of the river. “Danvers intends to strike at the canal terminal first and work his way south,” he explained, putting a map of Riyan over the table and using little glowing dots to highlight points on it. “Then he’s coming down to hit a cavalry reserve position here. After that, he’s going to swarm the ridges and capture the cannons, the real ones anyway, then use them to attack the trenches from behind.”

“Respectable. When will he attack?”

“Three hours after midnight. By the time you get there, the death machine should be out of action and the cannons will be shelling the Loreguard. What your men will have to be careful about, Field Marshall, are those traps. They have no men at all on the south bank looking for you, but they have lots and lots of traps. Pitfalls, deadfalls, annihilators set to go off when you step on tripwires, they have the forest and road on the south bank heavily trapped.”

“Understandable, and not easy to do at night. Tell Danvers that I will make our start for the river at sunrise, so my men can see to find the traps. He might want to delay his initial attack to just before dawn, so his men don’t have to hold those positions for too long. The Loreguard *will* try to counterattack.” “I’ll let him know, Field Marshall. I think he’ll use a talker

to respond if he needs to. It's much easier for me to just show you the map than try to describe things over a talker."

"Yes, yes it is. Return to Danvers, Steelhammer."

Kyven nodded, and the shadows seemed to rise up from the corners of the tent and consume him.

Within the shadow world, Kyven knelt down to be still and pushed his senses into the real world, picking up what they were saying. They were speaking Flauren, which Kyven didn't know, but what Kyven did have was a good memory. He listened for a few moments, then he made his way back to the army and tracked down Lucky. His calico friend was struggling valiantly to saddle a very frisky Vasha, who hadn't been saddled for a few days and was either annoyed about it or excited that she and Kyven might be going out. Lucky had managed to get the saddle over her back, but she kept shifting and prancing whenever he tried to get the saddle buckled under her belly, and she was tall enough for Lucky to all but stand underneath her. Lucky wasn't very tall. "Kyven," Lucky said, a little breathlessly. "Vasha!" he complained in a near-whine when the Equar pranced a little to the side, making the strap for which Lucky was reaching swing out of reach.

"Stop being mean, Vasha," Kyven chuckled. "I need your help, my friend."

"Sure! What do you need of me, Shaman?"

"Translation," he replied. "Listen." Kyven created an auditory illusion of what he heard the Flaurens saying; though he didn't understand the words, he could remember the *sounds*. It wasn't a perfect duplication, but it was in the men's own voices.

"Well, it's a little, I dunno, weird, but I can make most of it out," he replied. "The first voice asked why DeVaur puts up with you, and he answered that you could be Satan himself as long as you kept bringing him such detailed intelligence. He said that you're far more useful than even he

expected, and he wondered if all the Shaman are just as formidable. Then another asked how long it would take to get the men up to the riverbank.” He frowned. “Then DeVaur told him, ‘a lot faster than they think it will,’ and then he laughed. I don’t understand, what does he mean?”

“Sounds like DeVaur has something up his sleeve,” Kyven grunted. “Fuck, this shows that what Andra did is something I need to do too, but... well shit,” he sighed. “I can’t really deal effectively with the Flaurens if I can’t speak Flauren. There’s only one way I can do that.”

“*Her?*” Lucky asked.

Kyven nodded. “It means I have to make a deal with her, and I won’t like that. Not one fucking bit,” he growled. “But I just don’t see another way around it, unless I drag a translator with me when I go to snoop out what DeVaur’s got cooking behind his eyebrows.”

“Well, since you can’t do your job without it, maybe you can talk her into just giving it to you?”

Kyven laughed darkly. “If only that were how it works,” he stated grimly, then he blew out his breath. “Well, no use delaying the inevitable. Let me go get this overwith.”

He retreated to a secluded little glade in the forest, the sun turning the clouds red, hinting that they were thinning out, then sat down in the middle of it, surrounded by cool grass and a warm breeze that hinted at more rain despite the thinning clouds, sighed, and began. “Shadow fox,” he called, putting his intent behind his words, opting to speak as well as call to her mentally.

He glanced up, and she was there. Sitting sedately, her tail wrapped around her legs, her glowing emerald eyes regarding him with a calm, almost stony expression, but he could sense her *anticipation*. He had formally summoned her, and that meant that he needed something. And he had no choice but to get it from her. He sighed. “I need your help,” he admitted. “I just discovered that being unable to speak Flauren is going to

hamstringing any work I have to do against DeVaur. I can't let that pass. I...I need to learn the languages of Noraam, the way they were taught to Andra, so I can carry out my tasks effectively."

You seek a boon from me, she all but purred. You know what I demand as payment.

He frowned. "There has to be—"

I will accept nothing else, she stated, almost defiantly. You will surrender unto me Danna's Seal. It is the only thing you can offer that I want. I already have everything else, she told him with a slightly malicious gleam in her eyes.

"Then I can't carry out my tasks."

And it would be your fault for not seeking me out and asking this boon of me, she said, her eyes narrowing slightly, almost as if she were smiling. I will not tolerate foolishness, my Shaman, and to do such a thing would be foolish. I will teach you the other languages spoken on Noraam, my Shaman. In return, you will surrender Danna's Seal to me.

He gave her a nearly murderous look, glaring at her for nearly a full minute, but she was entirely unimpressed. He bowed his head and sighed, his shoulders slumped, and he nodded. "Danna's Seal in exchange for you teaching me the languages of Noraam."

We have a bargain, she declared triumphantly. She stood up and padded over, then pressed her muzzle against the side of his head. He felt her take the Seal, felt it pull out of him, and he did nothing to prevent it. But then he felt her sudden shock when she felt another Seal lurking within him, one whose function was clear after only a brief moment of inspection. Very clever, she admitted, almost amused. You are far more clever than I expected, my Shaman. But a bargain is a bargain. You gave me what I demanded, and so I must give you what I promised. And I will not be quite so quick to close a bargain next time.

"I am what you taught me to be, sister," he said simply.

The second Seal had been there for a couple of weeks, and it was one of the last things that Firetail had done for him. That Seal was against *him*, not Danna, which prevented him from fathering any children *with anyone except Umbra*. And Danna held the other end of the Seal, so it was only by her permission that he could have children by her, or as he suspected would happen in the future, by Nightfall. He was already officially on the hook to produce a second litter of shadow fox Arcans with Umbra, but so long as his Seal didn't interfere with that prior obligation, he was still upholding his side of the bargain. He *was* willing to father kits with Umbra, and was more than capable of it, but Danna held the key to allow him to have children with anyone else.

If the shadow fox wanted to breed him, she had to make a deal with *Danna* to do it.

And since Toby had already fulfilled his bargain with the shadow fox, it removed the possible threat that the shadow fox might try to use Toby to get Danna pregnant, since the removal of her Seal would allow it. Kyven had specifically warned him not to get into any deals that dealt with Danna, though he suspected that she would approach Toby with a deal to have kits by Umbra. If she wanted a viable shadow fox Arcan species, then the two males had to have kits by at *least* two of the three available females. It would be best to have it done by all three, but Kyven had a feeling that Danna would *find* a way to murder a spirit if the shadow fox tried to get her to have children by Toby.

But his little victory was drowned in a sudden jumble of words, meanings, phrases, idioms. Seven languages unknown to him poured into him at a shocking rate, bumping and jumbling together in his brain. Flauren, Cajar, Amishar, Mennish which was used in Hamm and Menn, Andra's own Gaulish tongue, and much to his shock, the ancient root language from which Flauren evolved called Spanish, flooded into his mind, swirling and seething, searching for a place to settle in. The seventh was Old Noravi, what was then called English, all the old words and definitions, its idioms and sayings, which would allow him to read anything of the old language left behind and understand it, even if the alphabet of English and Noravi

were almost identical, just the letters carrying slightly different, more simplistic shapes after a thousand years of change. It made him dizzy, so dizzy he couldn't even sit up, forced to clutch onto the soft fur of the shadow fox and hold on for dear life.

And then it was over. All that information seemed to just soak into his mind, taking up residence, and he realized that he could fluently speak *seven* languages now...and Flauren and Gaulish were definitely splinter languages of the original Spanish, he noted as he looked through that new information. They had evolved differently over the years, the speakers having been separated by the Angry Sea, and had each become its own language over time. Flauren had changed much more than Gaulish, influenced by Noravi, but Gaulish wasn't the same as its original language either. Noravi itself had changed, but not all that much. Many of the words were only slightly different, many new words had appeared to replace old ones, and older phrases and idioms had been forgotten over the years. But the core structure of the language was essentially unchanged.

Our bargain is complete, she told him, though she didn't seem to object that he was holding onto her. *And your counterstroke was a clever one. I am impressed with your creativity*, she added impishly.

"Blame yourself, you taught me," he replied a little woozily, then he felt well enough to let go of her.

You are the one that shouldn't be so smug, my Shaman, she replied lightly. *I have what I want, at least for now. What you have done will matter little in the course of things. In fact, Danna should be comfortably pregnant within the hour.*

"What? How?" he gasped.

I had my own magic at work within her, she replied, her tongue lolling out of her mouth. *The seed you gave her before you Sealed her, in your first joining when you were the Arcan, was still alive within her, just waiting for the magic of the Seal to be removed. It is removed. Now all I must do is incite her to ovulate, which I can easily do without you. Your Arcan seed*

will join to her Arcan eggs, and she will be pregnant. And you will hear her scream of pleasure, followed up by her scream of fury, all the way here in just a few moments, when I tell her that I have taken her Seal from you and then trigger her to ovulate, she added, a touch smugly.

He gaped at her, but then he remembered that she was a being of guile and deceit. She might just be trying to trick him into having Danna absolve his own Seal. He wouldn't believe her until he knew beyond any doubt that Danna was indeed pregnant.

Of course, it will require one thing, she purred, and he felt his bones turn to icewater, felt his body change. He'd been in his Arcan form the entire time and hadn't realized it, and she had triggered the amulet to change him back. And with its magic now in its recharge cycle, he couldn't take the Arcan form again for *hours*, which would give her the time to do, well, whatever it was she was going to do.

Despite his precautions, she'd found a way around him.

Her body quickly joined to the shadows stretching across the tiny clearing, until only her eyes were visible. *And you are right, my Shaman. Nightfall is next. But that will be another bargain, when I take that new Seal from Danna,* she purred, then her eyes were gone.

Exactly as he expected her to do.

He calmly sat down, laid back in the grass, looked up at the darkening cloudy sky, and considered the bargain. Spirits, Danna was going to blow up when she found out that the shadow fox had tricked him in a way he hadn't expected, had fixed it so she could get pregnant without them having sex again. And she was certainly going to blame *him*. That was the fallback for when she eventually got him to give up her Seal, to simply not consummate the deal by not having sex with her. He hadn't expected that she'd have a counterstroke in place before wresting her Seal from him.

He might want to steer clear of Danna for a while.

But it was exactly as he expected. He knew that he couldn't hold onto Danna's Seal forever, that eventually he would have to give it up...the first time he needed something from her. And it was exactly as he expected, at least up to a certain point. The Seal placed on *him* was part of the overall plan, where he gave up a little each time, yet the shadow fox found that he placed another barricade between her and her ultimate goal, forcing her to bargain every pitfall out of her way over and over and over. Buying time, buying more time, giving him more and more time to find a way to beat her. It was nothing but a stalling tactic, but the beauty of it was that it was *effective*. So long as he kept finding ways to stymie her *without* breaking any bargain he had already made, it gave him more and more time to try to out-think her. He had surrendered this battle, but now she knew that he had other battle lines drawn up, plans behind his plans reinforcing his plans.

And it also taught him that his treacherous totem was doing the same. She had a plan backing up her plan to take the Seal, and because he hadn't considered that possibility, he had lost that battle. Danna was going to be pregnant...but on the good side of that situation, it also fulfilled Danna's bargain with the shadow fox. When she gave birth to those kits, then the shadow fox would be *forced* to return her to her human self, to uphold her part of the bargain. That was the deal. Her humanity in exchange for producing one litter of shadow fox kits, those were the terms. And now, at least, the shadow fox would lose her hold on Danna.

Remove one piece from the board and give Kyven room to maneuver.

It put a big hammer in the shadow fox's other plans, he realized. With Danna released from her bargain, it meant that the magic binding him and her together would be removed, that he would lose his ability to take an Arcan form. The instant her pregnancy was fully realized, Danna would be *locked* in her Arcan form until she gave birth, because the lives inside her would be unable to withstand the transformation from human to Arcan and back again, over and over and over. *That* was the reason the shadow fox told him she wanted to alter the way he and Danna were tied together, to allow him to take the Arcan form without taking it from Danna. But, that

would require another bargain. She couldn't do that of her own volition, Danna would have to *agree* to it.

He would tell Danna *not* to do so. It would further his own plans. It would remove one of his advantages, but it was a small sacrifice in the short term for a larger gain in the long term.

Because, this wasn't just about Danna anymore. This was about fighting for his own place with his spirit. If she could continue to manipulate him, manipulate the woman he loved, his friends, then he would be nothing more than a slave. In a way, he always would be, but he had to stand up to her. He had to fight for Danna, for Toby, and for Nightfall and Umbra. He had to be their voice when the shadow fox tried to walk over them.

He had to prove to her, and to himself, that he could hold his own when the hands were put on the table and the cards were counted.

It was a good thing that he was now armed with the ability to speak Flauren.

Lurking within the shadow world inside DeVaur's tent, Kyven found out fairly soon just how angry DeVaur was with him. The man could tolerate him for his ability to bring him information that made his attacks easier, but DeVaur *hated* him for the humiliation he endured at the Shaman's hands, and he fully intended to see Kyven die before Avannar fell. DeVaur was going to kill Kyven, kill him *himself*, and intended to do it just before the attack on Avannar, when Kyven brought him that last intelligence report. Until then, DeVaur was all honeyed smiles and politeness, a true military gentleman, until the day he could take out his pistol and put a bullet between Kyven's eyes.

DeVaur also held a special hatred for Danvers. Listening to him rant to his main assistant that evening gave Kyven a window into DeVaur's mind. He was an egomaniac, a megalomaniac, considering himself to be the best

military mind on Noraam, but Danvers' amazing successes with his rag-tag band of untrained Arcans and irregular cavalry was making the military world look at *Danvers*, not *DeVaur*. Kyven had part of that blame, for DeVaur was certain that Danvers was doing so well because of the detailed intelligence Kyven brought to him on a daily basis—that was actually correct, and Danvers would be the first to admit it—and it was stealing DeVaur's thunder. DeVaur wanted the entirety of Noraam to admire him and all but worship him as he walked his horse into Avannar and accepted the formal surrender of the Loreguard, captured Avannar for Flaur and for his King, but Danvers kept getting in the way of that dream. DeVaur wanted to see Danvers defeated, but he couldn't afford to have that happen when Danvers was actually clearing DeVaur's path and allowing him to get to Avannar with his full army. Again, at Avannar, DeVaur had a little surprise in mind to spring on Danvers that would crush his Arcan army, turn on them during the battle and wipe Danvers' much smaller army off the face of Noraam, then march on to ultimate victory against the Loreguard

DeVaur was fully plotting to murder Danvers during the battle at Avannar. But before that, he intended to attack Danvers' army in *Riyan*. It would be accidental, of course, a case of his army arriving in Riyan faster than anticipated and getting a little over-eager to engage the enemy. He even had a captain briefed on how to do it and ready to accept "responsibility" for the accident. The captain would receive a public reprimand, but a promotion to Major after it was over.

Well, two could play that game. And Kyven could almost admire DeVaur for his cunning. Some would call his plots cowardice, but Kyven was not one of those, mainly because he used the same tactics himself. It wasn't cowardice, it was using available opportunities and exploiting weaknesses.

It only took a few moments of eavesdropping on DeVaur's briefing with his officers to see what he intended to do, and how to turn it against him. DeVaur had two prongs of his intent to attack Danvers. The first element of his plan was Major Sancha, who would take a company of cavalry and flank the city using ten collapsible alchemical boats the army

was carrying, then attempt to get to the Arcan army from the back and try to steal Briton rifles and any other equipment they felt would be useful. Sancha was chosen because he spoke fluent, unaccented Noravi, as did every man that would be under his command. they would try to bluff their way past the Arcans guarding the supplies, take everything useful they could get their hands on, then simply ride off.

The attack DeVaur had planned was similarly underhanded. He was going to attack the soldiers that intended to attack the Loreguard cavalry reserves halfway between the canal and the cannon emplacements, do it just before dawn, either right as or just after Danvers' men attacked the Loreguard, then claim it was a simple case of mistaken identity. The captain chosen for that mission, Captain Arvaz, was chosen because he did *not* speak Noravi, so his mistaken attack on Danvers men might be a little more believable, thinking them to be Loreguard cavalry in the darkness. Of course, they weren't supposed to be there before dawn, which DeVaur would explain away as a change in plans when they "discovered" some collapsible Alchemical boats in the ruins of southern Riyan, and decided to use them

Well, turnabout was fair play.

Kyven didn't warn Danvers about their plot, because he didn't want DeVaur to know that he'd been found out. DeVaur didn't know Kyven could listen to every word he said without any way to detect him, far beyond even using an illusion to lurk nearby, hiding in the shadow world and looking and listening into the real world.

The shadow fox was right. His shadow powers *were* far more powerful than his illusions. But his illusions and his trickery still had critical roles to play in this game. Just because his shadow powers were proving to be more useful in this phase of the campaign, that didn't mean that he would forget his fundamental identity and purpose.

Guile and deceit.

There was going to be a battle at Riyan, but it wasn't going to go the way that DeVaur expected. In fact, the cunning Field Marshall was going to be in for quite a shock. It was going to be quick, it was going to be decisive, and it wasn't going to go DeVaur's way one little bit.

Not if Kyven had anything to do about it.

Chapter 21

At sunset, Kyven began. His primary responsibility was the alchemical death machine, which was the cornerstone of the Loreguard plan to stall DeVaur at the James River. The debris wall they'd piled on the far side of the river and all their trenches and tactical positioning revolved around the cannons and the death machine; the cannons were a lure, a trick, to bait DeVaur into trying to charge the ridge with a big chunk of his army, then have them slaughtered by the death machine hidden in that excavated hole behind the first row of trenchworks, completely concealed from the south shore of the river.

Kyven's shadow powers again served him well. Kyven lurked within the shadow world, hidden from the *things* by the shadows themselves as he sat in on the meeting with the officers as Loreguard General Markos Longshot went over all their preparations, as well as got down to business. "Our intelligence places the Flaurens just a few minars south of us," he declared. "They might be in position to attack within a few hours. And if DeVaur is close, then that means that Danvers and that Trinity-damned army of Arcans of his must also be close by, so keep a sharp eye out and make sure the scouts with the night goggles stay alert. I can't stress enough, gentlemen, that this is not some valiant last stand. If you believe the Flaurens will penetrate the line, then you call a retreat. Save every man possible for when we fight them for real at Avannar. No man here is going to be called out for calling a retreat, because that's what you're *supposed* to do. Hold them off as long as you think it safe to do so, then retreat while you can, when you have the advantage to retreat safely, before you do it with musket balls chasing your ass. Understood?"

The officers all nodded or rumbled their acknowledgement.

“If the Arcans are indeed close by, remember your training,” he continued. “They’re fast, they can see at night, they’re hard to bring down with a single musket shot, and they’ll try to get close enough for hand to hand combat, where they think they have the advantage. Use that against them. Let them charge, then mow them down. I have no doubt that DeVaur will have the Arcans attack first, because that’s about all they’re good for,” Longshot grunted, which made a few of the officers chuckle. “Any questions?”

A younger man raised his hand. “Yes, Captain Gardner?”

He stood and saluted. “Sir, what do we do if they flank us at the canal? If I were them, that’s where I’d attack first.”

The general gave him an approving look. “If for some reason you can’t retreat to the canal, then pull your men back up Tobacco Road and reform at Mission Ridge. We can hold that as we organize, not even DeVaur’s Arcans would be insane enough to charge *that*.”

And that was what Kyven needed to know. He only listened with half an ear through the rest of the briefing, then stalked off into the shadow world as he planned out his counter. He sought out Captain Gardner’s unit, which just *happened* to be the death machine, sitting on a crate as the men made sure the death machine was ready to go. When they heard the bugle, the men picked up their rifles and pointed them in every direction; they had orders to shoot *anyone* that approached the death machine once that bugle sounded, for fear that the human Shaman might attack under the guise of someone else. The Loreguard did learn from past experience, but unfortunately for them, Kyven was already there...though his mind wasn’t really on things.

He was pondering his vision, and what it meant.

He was supposed to guide the entirety of Noraam. That was a huge responsibility, but what was more, if *he* was the one that had to do it, then it meant that it wasn’t going to be very pretty. It meant that it was going to take manipulation, deceit, possibly betrayal and murder. He was supposed

to use his understanding of what had happened in the past to guide the future...well, what *did* happen in the past? Well, the Great Ancients destroyed themselves by messing with powers beyond their comprehension. They had overstepped themselves, had been so confident in their knowledge that they lacked the *wisdom* to know when and where to stop.

How that applied to what was going on now wasn't very similar, up to a point. The humans were holding the Arcans in slavery, and that had to stop. It wasn't going to be pretty when the time came to free them. Arcan slaves were going to be killed before they could be freed, and it was going to take war to make some countries, like Flaur, release their Arcans.

In both cases, humanity was refusing to see a fundamental truth. In the past, it was the truth that they were dabbling with power they couldn't understand nor control. In the present, it was that the era of slavery was at an end. The spirits had decided to move, and Kyven and Andra had been born because of it.

Human Shaman. That was part of what was coming, but it wouldn't be his part. Andra would be the one that would show humanity that Shaman weren't what they believed them to be. Kyven...well, Kyven was there to *reinforce* what they believed Shaman were. Black and white, good and evil, Kyven and Andra represented the polar opposites of the Shaman, showing that Shaman were as diverse and different from each other as they were from those who weren't Shaman. Shaman like Kyven and Stalker worked side by side with Shaman like Clover and Andra. Humanity had to see that the Shaman weren't their enemies, and while Kyven didn't advance that cause in any way, actually moved the bar backwards because his powers and abilities were terrifying to those who didn't understand them, it was a fundamental truth, a necessary change that humans had to make. They *needed* Shaman, and because of that, human Shaman had been born.

And the future of Noraam had been placed in the hands of the Shaman that represented the evil side.

He could admit that much. Though Kyven didn't consider himself to *be* evil, he understood that he often had to *commit* evil deeds in order to do his job. His spirit believed that the end justified the means, and Kyven had come to adopt that philosophy himself, because the stakes were simply too high to fail. He knew he would be called upon to kill, to terrify, to use fear as a weapon against his enemies...indeed, fear was his greatest weapon as it was. The Loreguard was *terrified* of Kyven Steelhammer, and they took extravagant precautions to try to guard against him.

So, in what was to come, how would he try to guide Noraam to the desired outcome of a free Arcan nation and the peaceful separation and coexistence of both nations? That was, after all, the ultimate goal. Noraam would live on the east side of the Smoke Mountains, prosper, and be happy, and the Arcans would live on the great plains west of the mountains, prosper, and be happy. There might even be trade and amicable relations after some time, after the humans got used to the new order, and they came to accept the human Shaman as part of human society.

The obstacles were many and considerable, and the highest among them was religion. The Loremasters had used the faith in the Holy Trinity for *centuries* to justify the abuse and enslavement of the Arcans, twisting the scriptures so that monsters like Arthur Ledwell were morally and socially acceptable...so long as they turned their sadism on those they considered to be animals, to have no souls.

He would know what to do. She told him that he would know what to do.

She was right.

The men screamed in fear and levelled their weapons at him when an ominous black-haired man sat on a crate of anchors used for the death machine, eyes glowing with that emerald aura...just sitting there. He made no hostile moves, he just sat there and stared up at the stars. "S-Stay right there! Don't move!" one of the men quavered, levelling a musket at him.

“A beautiful night,” Kyven said softly, looking up at the stars. “Please, boys, put the guns down.” The men squeaked in fear and flinched when their muskets jerked out of their hands by a solid *nothing*, then vanished into the darkness like they melted away to nothing. “You’ve been outflanked,” he said in that same soft voice. “Danvers is about to capture your entire army.”

The man gaped at him, afraid to move, but more afraid of what might happen if they didn’t do *something*. “Shaman!” one of them shrieked. “The Shaman is here!”

That caused almost instantaneous chaos. Men ran all over, but none of them approached the death machine because they knew that the men there would kill anyone who approached, part of the precautions to prevent the Shaman from sneaking up on them under the illusion of a member of the army...which didn’t do them much good.

“Have you ever felt helpless?” he asked Captain Garder in a conversational, almost bemused voice. “Know that you have to do something you don’t want to do, but if you don’t do it, things will be much worse? I suppose you do,” he noted as they gawked at him. “I don’t think you much relish the idea of using this thing. You aren’t murderers, you’re soldiers. You’re just doing your job,” he said, then he slapped his knees with both hands, making them flinch. “I guess I’m doing my job too,” he said as he stood up. “Gentlemen, if you’d kindly back away from the death machine. I don’t want any of you caught up in this.”

“A-Are you going to attack?” the captain stuttered.

“Not you,” he replied with an enigmatic little smile. “Not tonight. In fact, I’m here to *prevent* an attack. Tell General Longshot to pull his men out *now*. Danvers is coming, and he has you dead to rights. I should know, I sat in on Longshot’s briefing to his officers, and his briefing made it clear that he has no idea Danvers is already on *this* side of the river, preparing to blindside you with an army three times the size of your garrison here. Danvers will roll over you like a full barrel coming downhill. If you’re still

here in three hours, you'll either be dead or staring down the barrels of about ten thousand muskets."

"Why tell us that?"

"Because my quarrel is with the *Loremasters*, not with *you*," he said intently, walking past them, then turning to look at them with his back to the sinister metal contraption. A huge circle of darkness appeared under both the Shaman and the device. "Now retreat, gentlemen. Avannar is going to need you."

Then the circle of darkness rose up off the ground, and wherever it passed over the Shaman and the device, they just *vanished*. When the circle rose up over the top of the device, it was gone. The circle of darkness itself then evaporated like smoke, leaving the death machine crew with no death machine to operate.

"Stand down and prepare to retreat!" Gardner said quickly. "We have to warn the general!"

About ten minars south of Riyan, the Flaurens were enjoying their meals around hundreds of campfires, each one placed in an exact spot that created a perfectly symmetrical pattern. Muskets were placed near tent clusters, covered with canvas to protect them from any possible dew, and music was playing at many of the fires. South of the neat and orderly rows of Flauren fires, the less organized encampment of the Georvans were scattered along Tobacco Road, in fields to each side. The Georvans too were enjoying a late dinner, knowing that they'd be moving soon, and getting as much rest as they could before what would be a very long night and an even longer day.

The grand tent of Field Marshall DeVaur was in the exact center of the Flauren camp, right in the middle of the road, with a cushion of space between his pavilion style tent and the tents of other officers. The Flaurens didn't concentrate all their officers' tents in one area so as to prevent a loss

of the chain of command if the army were somehow ambushed. DeVaur himself was lounging in his tent, listening to a quartet of musicians as they played chamber music, discussing the latest opera that opened just before they deployed from Tallasar with one of his colonels. But the conversation ended abruptly when a cloud of what could only be called liquid shadow manifested in an open area between his table and his rather luxurious bed, and a figure appeared within those swirling, shifting shadows. The glowing eyes were the first thing that they could make out, and DeVaur gave a tight look as the shadows melted away.

“Shaman,” DeVaur said in a steady voice. “Do you bring news?”

“Yes, I bring news, DeVaur,” Kyven said in a calm, almost serene voice. “The battle is over.”

DeVaur laughed. “Did the Loreguard surrender?”

“No, they haven’t surrendered yet,” Kyven answered, turning out in the open area between DeVaur’s tent and the nearest. “But the battle’s over. The Loreguard is already retreating to the north.”

“What happened?” one of the officers asked.

Kyven turned and sat on the ground cross-legged, leaning down on his elbows. “The Loreguard scouted out your army, decided it was too big to even try to slow down, and retreated. But General Longshot has you dead to rights. You need to move your army east, right now.”

“And why should we do that?”

“Because they have a death machine about a minute away from being ready to fire, and it’s right over there,” he said, pointing to the west.

DeVaur snapped his head to a low ridge to the west, which was hidden by the night.

“I’d order the retreat, DeVaur,” Kyven told him in a calm voice. “Right now.”

Then they heard it. There was a sound that a death machine made when it activated, a sound that all military officers were trained to identify. That deep, rumbling *THOOM* washed over the camp, and DeVaur didn't have to give the order. Half the men knew that sound, and the sudden inky blackness that appeared to the west, swallowing the light, warned them from where the attack was coming.

"To the east!" DeVaur screamed. "Retreat to the east!"

Kyven walked slowly out of the pavilion as he watched the armies of the Flaurens and the Georvans run wildly, screaming, to the east. They plowed over tents, tripped over crates, the smarter ones jumped on horses or mules, and some men were killed when they were trampled over by the panicked mass of humanity as a broiling, undulating, seething black cloud of pure death rolled in from the west, pushed by the wind and moving with great speed. DeVaur himself was on his horse, galloping to the east with his officers, the Georvan generals, and he was knocking men down in his haste. Clearly, it was every man for himself. Kyven looked at the billowing cloud with detached interest, and made no move to escape or protect himself as he swept into the field holding DeVaur's camp, moving as fast as a trotting horse. The nearest trailing soldier was about a hundred rods ahead of the lethal cloud, panting heavily as he ran for his life. The man saw the black cloud envelop the human Shaman as he looked over his shoulder, who had made not even an attempt to escape it, but he was too panicked to think of anything but saving his own life.

The men at the lead of the retreating soldiers kept running, if only because they would get trampled from behind if they stopped. It was a full rout, and that meant that the men had to protect themselves from their comrades as much as from the main threat. The lead men reached the trees, which slowed them down, but also gave them some protection from those behind, as now everyone had to duck and dodge and weave among the trunks and branches, though it did little to help them against the thick brambles and thorn bushes for which the forests of the Free Territories were rather infamous. The Flauren Field Marshall ducked under a branch as he entered the forest, looking back over his shoulder to see that the cloud was

turning, the wind was pushing it south. He slowed to a stop as men ran to each side of his horse, watching the cloud with intense concentration. "Slow up!" he called. "The cloud is being turned by the wind! We are safe for the moment! Officers, Sergeants, organize the men for a more orderly withdrawal! We will pull back until the death machine is out of power, then return!"

On the other side of the cloud, Kyven's face was a mask of intense concentration as he maintained the illusion. There was no cloud around him, the illusion only existed at its vanguard, visible from the other side. He continued to put everything into it, almost trembling from the effort to hold such a large illusion such a distance from him. He started to pant, sweat dripping down his face as he allowed the cloud to start breaking up, swirling and buckling around a gust of wind that blew, quite naturally, across the large field upon which the encampment had been set. He allowed the wind to tear the illusory cloud asunder, and once its integrity was broken, it evaporated with unnatural speed.

Smiling, Kyven retreated two steps back into the opening of DeVaur's tent, then his body melted away into the shadows.

The pieces were now all in place.

Back at the camp, Kyven appeared by the fire of the Shaman, their tents erected in a semicircle before it. They were sitting on logs around it, eating venison as Clover scratched Sirra's belly, which caused her leg to shake and her mouth to open in a kind of canine-like dreamy contentment. The Shaman were relaxing before the coming battle, as was the army, judging from the music and laughter drifting to them from the distant campfires. In about an hour, Danvers would rile them and get them ready for the attack. For now, they were resting and preparing for a long night of action...which would never happen.

"Brother, what brings you back?" Patience asked. "Were you not watching the Loreguard?"

“I was, not anymore,” he replied, going past them, heading for the single pole corral where Strider and Vasha were frisking around. “The Loreguard army is preparing to retreat right now.”

“Now? They don’t intend to hold Riyan?” Longstep asked.

Kyven nodded. “They’ll be done before Danvers can get the army in position, so they’ll get away.”

“Kyven, Kyven!” Danvers called as he hurried out of the tent. “The forward scouts say the Loreguard are preparing to retreat!”

“They are,” he replied as he pulled a pole down to get into the corral, heading right for the Equars. Both of them pranced a bit as he arrived, and he patted both of them fondly before putting his hands on Vasha’s powerful chest, calming her. “Easy, girl, we’re going out. I need to saddle you.”

“What happened?” Danvers asked.

“Not much, Wilson. I just told them you were about to attack, then stole their death machine. They took me seriously, I suppose,” he chuckled.

“You *what*?” Danvers snapped. “You compromised our plans?”

“I did,” he replied calmly. “Wasn’t the plan to get DeVaur past Riyan with a minimum of losses? Well, that’s what I did.”

“But now those men will add to the forces in Avannar!” he retorted hotly. “We could have reduced the number of troops and artillery pieces we’ll be facing later!”

“Those men won’t matter all that much in the end, Wilson,” he said dismissively. “They lost the death machine, and that’s what matters most.”

“Well, where is it?”

“The death machine? Oh, I left that not too far from DeVaur’s troops and used illusions to convince them that the Loreguard got it down there and turned it on to try to kill his army. DeVaur will capture it and add it to

his own armory, and that's right where I want it," Kyven said with a dark chuckle, taking Vasha's saddle blanket from a stand near the corral pole.

"What do you mean?"

"Wilson, DeVaur is going to betray us," he replied simply. "He has a plan in place to attack our army at Riyan and blame the Loreguard for it, hoping to steal some of our rifles and supplies as well as just thinning out your army. That's in preparation for Avannar, where he intends to attack *us* as well as the Loreguard, wipe out our army, and he intends to put a bullet in both our brains. He wants to kill us *personally*. Actually, his plan is fairly clever. As a fellow trickster, I can appreciate the cunning of his idea. So, Wilson, I'm just putting everything in place to backstab *him* before he can backstab *us*. Right before he sets his little plan in motion to wipe out our army, that death machine is going to be there to wipe out *his* army. Up until that point, he'll continue to serve his purpose of scaring the shit out of the Loreguard generals up in Avannar."

"We knew he was going to betray us, Kyven, but we could use that death machine."

"We won't need that one, Wilson. There are sixteen of them in Avannar, and we can steal them anytime we please," he said as he picked up Vasha's saddle, then almost had to jump to throw it over her back.

He seemed to mull that over. "I don't approve of you changing the plan like this, Kyven. I appreciate your help, but we were counting on defeating the Riyan garrison both to reduce their numbers and also to get them out of our way so we don't have to worry about them as we move north. Now they can evacuate most of their men by barge and leave behind a skirmish force to set traps all the way to Avannar."

"I know, but those will be DeVaur's problem," he shrugged, hunching over and stepping under the Equar to grab the saddle cinch strap dangling on the far side. "We can just go west of them and outrun them, Wilson, because if I remember right, our plan was to go straight to Danna after this. Hell, we could probably beat the barges there and ambush them before they

can reach the city, if you really wanted to. I'm sorry that I didn't consult you first, but I had to get everyone back on the right track."

"What do you mean?"

"You're focused on defeating the Loreguard and taking Avannar, then falling back to protect the Arcans and Haven. My goals are a bit longer, Wilson, and I had to do a few things to get both DeVaur and the Loreguard back on the path they need to be on, that's all."

"What goals are those, my friend?"

"The same as yours, really, Wilson. Freeing the Arcans from slavery. I know that's what you want to see, but it's not entirely what you're here to do. While you focus on the battles, I'm focusing on the bigger plan, that extends past the war we're fighting. When the time comes, you'll have a very big hand in freeing the Arcans from slavery, my friend, but for now, let me worry about that part. After all, it's my job."

"I thought the Shaman sent you to help us."

"They did, but I take orders from my spirit, Wilson. She may be a bitch, but she is very wise, and I am her faithful Shaman. To be honest about it, I've been playing two different games here, my friend. What you need me to do, and what she needs me to do. Most of the time those two goals are the same, but there have been a few times when I've had to act on my own. Like tonight."

Danvers seemed to ponder that a moment. "Can I trust you, Kyven?" he asked in a sober voice.

"You've never been able to fully trust me," he shrugged. "Like I said, I've been playing my own game in all this, Wilson. I've done a few things that would make you *very* angry," he said with a slight smile. "I had everything all planned out to get all the armies at Avannar at the same time, let them get beaten up taking the city, then let them fight each other while the Arcans pulled back to the mountains and let them have at it. I still want to see that, but now I need to do something more, because my plan didn't

include rescuing the Arcan slaves still in Noraam. It was aimed mainly at protecting Haven, with the idea of freeing the Arcans afterwards, after the human armies shattered themselves both fighting each other and then fighting the Arcans, when they'd no longer be able to stop the Arcans from coming in and freeing the others. Well, my spirit has taken me to task for not thinking that far ahead, so I need to see to that oversight, and that means that I have to take a few steps outside of the plans you have. And the other Shaman as well," he said calmly.

"And what will that accomplish, my brother?" Clover asked as she came out of one of the tents. "You are a totem Shaman, but you are also one of us. Such things need to be discussed among us."

"It'll accomplish quite a bit, sister," he answered her as she ducked under the corral pole, and Kyven managed to buckle the saddle. "I had a vision, sister. My totem showed me the path I have to take. Simply put, I'm the harbinger."

"The what?" Danvers asked.

"I'm the one who comes before the one that matters, bearing the message," he said simply. "The future is in Andra's hands, Wilson. She's the one that will change humanity's minds about the Shaman. My job is to make sure that the people are ready for her when she shows up. I have to clear the path for her, so she can walk without fear of tripping over every root and rock. That means that I have to kill a few people that would stand in her way," he admitted. "Andra was born to serve humanity as their first Shaman. I see that now. I was born to serve the *Arcans* as *their* first human Shaman. I belong to the Arcans. Andra's place is with the people. Mine is with the Arcans, but I'll help her in her task by preparing humanity for her arrival. Andra will change the minds of the humans about the Shaman. Part of my task was to show the Arcans that not all humans are what they believe. I was born to show the Arcans that humans can believe in them, and they can believe in us. Andra will show the humans that Shaman are not what they think they are, and that they need us."

Clover gave him a long, searching look. “You would raise her up to be the hero.”

“Not quite. She’ll do that on her own,” he answered. “Her personality will draw people to her. My job is to make sure people are ready to listen to her when finishes her Walk and starts down her own path. People will be in despair, then Andra will appear and bring them hope. And that hope will change them, make them better. Mankind will become what they were meant to be, not what they have made of themselves.”

“And how are you going to do that?” Wilson asked.

“Simple. I’m going to free every Arcan in Noraam,” he replied calmly. “And in the chaos left in the wake of losing their slave labor, Andra will fill that void with hope and self reliance. She’ll teach the people how to do for themselves, to take pride in their own work, and in time, to accept the Arcans as equals. But most importantly, she’ll teach mankind that the Shaman are not their enemies,” he said as he stepped over and picked up Vasha’s bridle. “While the kingdoms commit their armies to securing what few sources of crystals there is left in Noraam, then face off against you and Danna, I’m going to take advantage of it and start an Arcan rebellion that will sweep across the entire continent. I’ve got a plan in mind that will hopefully clear the path for Andra when she’s finished with her Walk and takes her place among the Shaman. Oh, and we give the Arcans still in bondage a fighting chance. It’s going to take a little deceit and a little betrayal, but if everything works the way I hope it does, then everything will be ready for Andra when her time comes. We all have parts to play in the performance that’s coming, and I don’t mind being cast as the villain. In a way, my spirit has prepared me for it.” He buckled the bridle, then patted Vasha on the muzzle. “Humanity will curse my name for a thousand years, my friends. But I don’t mind, since my place was never going to be among them.” He chuckled. “You just keep going the way you’re going, Wilson. Defeating the Loreguard and finally removing the last vestiges of the power of the Loremasters from Noraam is a critical task, and I wouldn’t feel any more comfortable with it being in your hands.”

Danvers seemed to digest that for a moment, giving Kyven time to finish getting Vasha ready to go. “Where are you going, brother?” Clover asked.

“You’re going to need me to scout ahead,” he shrugged. “I’m just saving Lucky the trouble of trying to saddle Vasha when she’s feeling playful. Ebony, we’re leaving, gather everyone up!” he shouted. “The flaw in my plan was the idea of waiting, and then having the Arcans come in and free the slaves. I forgot to take into account basic human nature. The common man would remember that humiliation until the end of time, and it would foment an enmity for the Arcans that would never fade. Instead, the Arcans in bondage are going to rise up and take their freedom. It won’t be much better than having the victorious Arcan army march in like conquering heros, but in time, and with Andra there to reinforce the idea that the Arcan slaves simply exercised their rights as sentient beings to take their freedom, in time things will smooth over. It’s time for the Arcans to remember who they once were, sister,” he said simply. “It is time for them to reach back into the past and embrace their inner warrior. The Arcans in Haven understand it. I have to bring that message to the rest of them.”

Clover gave him a long, assessing look, then finally nodded, her expression sober.

“You speak like that has great meaning, my friend. Explain it to me,” Danvers pressed.

“The Arcans weren’t created by the Great Ancients to be slaves, Wilson, they were created to be *soldiers*, to fight in the war,” he explained. “That’s why the Arcans we have here are so good at soldiering, if not all that good at the actual *fighting*. We have to teach them to fight, but think about it, Wilson. They do everything else like it was automatic. The basic programming of being soldiers is still in them, and it’s why they work so well together. In a way, it works against them, because it reinforces behavior they learn as slaves. Cohesion, being part of a group, obedience to authority, they’re integral parts of Arcan nature, and they’re traits that make some of them take a complete slave mentality.”

“How do you know that?”

“Part of the vision my spirit showed me was showing me the past,” he said, his voice a little distant. “I saw the Great Ancient civilization, Wilson. I saw it rise up, and then I saw it fall. I saw the buildings reaching halfway into the sky...and then I saw them crumble into dust. My spirit told me that I had to understand the past in order to know how to move forward into the future. I understand what she was trying to teach me. Humanity is going to villify whoever frees the Arcans. That’s *my* job. Hell, they see me as a villain as it is, it won’t be much of a stretch. I will spread despair and chaos across the land,” he said in a distant tone. “Not with evil intent, mind you, but you have to admit that that’s exactly what’s going to happen once the Arcans are gone,” he chuckled darkly. “This way, Andra’s not the one carrying that title. She can’t help humanity if they see her as the one that destroyed their way of life. That’s what *I* am going to do,” he said simply, nodding as Ebony, Striker, and Fastpaw arrived, with Sirra and Dauro just behind them. “My spirit prepared me well for this, Wilson. I’ve learned that so long as those who love me still love me when it’s over, then I can be happy despite what the rest of the world thinks of me. As long as I have your respect, Wilson, and the respect of the Arcans, I can’t go wrong.”

“Well, my friend, if you need help, you know where I am,” Danvers said strongly. “Freeing the Arcans from slavery has been the focus of my life for nearly fifteen years. I’d be honored to carry that burden with you.”

“That matters to me very much, my friend,” he said, clapping Danvers on the shoulder. “We’re going to scout ahead, nannies,” he told his three protectors. “I think we’ll leave Lucky and Lightfoot here, I think they could use some time to themselves,” he chuckled.

“Then I will go with you,” Clover said. “We need to talk, my brother. Long and deeply.”

“I’d be happy to have you, sister,” he said as Ebony hurried towards the tent where he rarely stayed, more to hold what gear he didn’t take with

him than anything else. It doubled as the storage area for his gear when he was with the army.

Ebony returned with his saddlebags and weapons, and they loaded them on Vasha's saddle as Clover went and gathered up her own pack. Danvers stood nearby, his expression lost in thought, no doubt mulling over everything Kyven had told him. "Which way do you want me to go, Wilson?"

He blinked. "A western approach to Avannar. We'll probably join up with Danna somewhere along the way."

"Alright. Since I'll have Clover with me, we'll make sure you get detailed directions on which way to go," he affirmed.

"Alright. Let me get the army ready to move. I don't want to be here when DeVaur comes north, he might attack us."

"He will," Kyven said simply. "Right now, Wilson, DeVaur is just as much an enemy as the Loreguard. If he catches up to our army, he'll try to wipe it out, so we need to leave him behind. And remember, he wants to kill you himself. Don't accept *any* offer he makes for a meeting."

"Alright."

Clover was ready within five minutes, but she wasn't alone. Dancer as well was wearing a pack and ready to move, and when he climbed up into Vasha's saddle, she fell in beside Clover, obviously intent on going with them. Kyven climbed up into the saddle of his Equar, then looked down at Danvers as Strider pranced over and nearly knocked him down with a playful butt of his snout. Kyven chuckled as Danvers glared at his spirited companion, then laughed helplessly and patted him on the snout. "Be very careful, Wilson."

"We will. Send me hourly reports, and do your best to avoid excessive contact with Loreguard patrols."

“Will do,” Kyven nodded, patting Vasha on the base of her neck. “Let’s go, girl.”

Clover and Dancer loped easily alongside Vasha as they rode to the north, moving to get at the base of the Smoke Mountains and ride parallel to them. Though it was very dark once they left the lights of the army, none of them, not even Vasha, had any problems at all seeing. Kyven had to rely on spirit sight to let him see, but everyone else had night-attuned eyes. As they traveled, Kyven described his vision to his sisters with great detail, even describing the taste of the grass, then explained to him what he had learned from it in terms that fellow Shaman would understand. He then told him what he believed it meant, and what it meant that he had to do, and he was much more descriptive with them than he was with Danvers. Danvers was committed to the freedom of the Arcans, but even he might blanch at what Kyven felt he’d have to do in order to complete his mission.

He leaned his elbows on Vasha’s stout back—his saddle lacked the rope horn that many saddles possessed to give the saddle the ability to let the horse pull things—and sighed. “When I told Wilson I was going to be the villain, I think he doesn’t realize just what that’s going to entail. He’ll find out soon enough,” he grunted. “As soon as DeVaur pulls that death machine where I want it to be.”

“You’re going to activate it,” Dancer said quietly.

“I am,” he said grimly. “It should kill at least a quarter of DeVaur’s army if I do it right. And I’m going to make sure they *see me* do it, sister. I have to be the villain, so that means I have to commit a few atrocities. I’m in no way going to enjoy doing it, but it is what must be done. And I’ve been chosen to do it,” he said with a sober expression. “That’s the cost of wisdom, I suppose. The understanding that sometimes things are beyond your control, and you simply have to do your job no matter how much you might hate it.” He sat back up as Vasha lowered herself down to drink, which required her to spread her forelegs a little to get her head down that far. “It’s a little change from the original plan, but not much. I was supposed to go after the human armies anyway.”

“What plan is this?” Clover asked.

“My spirit has her own plans in all this, sister,” he admitted. “I’ve been playing both sides against each other for a while, and I’m going to betray just about everyone in the end. A few of the things I’ve done would make you and the other Shaman very mad,” he admitted. “But that’s because I believe in what I’m doing. I *know* what the humans are going to do, how they’re going to react. I’m just using it against them to give the Arcans the greatest chance possible.”

“And what would make us so mad, brother?”

“Guiding DeVaur *and* the Loreguard armies into a head-on clash that will be absolutely ghastly,” he replied. “The Shaman would be against what I’ve been told I have to do, but I *know* that my spirit is right. The only way the Arcans can win this and gain both independence and acceptance is if the twelve kingdoms of Noraam are too busy fighting each other to be serious about marching their armies halfway across the continent. My mission was to so debilitate and weaken the human armies that they wouldn’t be a threat to Haven, and that required...managing them. I’ve given both sides information that Danvers would have considered treasonous. I’ve manipulated the kings, lied to Danna and the council, assassinated those who jeopardized the plan, misdirected Danvers, even lied to you, sisters. I’ve given aid to the enemy, and I’m not done yet. Those men heading for Avannar right now that left Riyan, they’re as much a part of my plan as DeVaur’s army is.”

“How so?”

“Something my spirit said to me,” he said, looking up at the stars. “That there are good men in the Loreguard who are simply fighting for the wrong side, who don’t know the truth. They aren’t our enemies. I’ve killed the Circle, and now the Loremasters are in chaos. That means that the Loreguard generals are keeping things together until the Loremasters repair the damage I’ve done. This gives me the chance to try to tell them the truth.

I think that if the common soldier knew what was *really* going on, he wouldn't be quite so enthusiastic about fighting for the Loreguard."

"You intend to sow dissent in the enemy ranks?" Dancer asked.

He nodded. "The Loreguard as a military entity has to fold as quickly as possible for my plan to work. What I really want to see is those men in the Loreguard either go home or join the armies of their home kingdoms. As long as they're fighting each other, their armies can be as big as they want them to be. And they *will* fight each other. DeVaur already has orders to take and hold Atan immediately upon the fall of Avannar, even if he has to march over everyone else to get there first. And I know that he's not the only general with those orders. The second the commander of the Loreguard hands over his sword, there's going to be a general brawl on the western road as all the armies fight to get to Atan first. And whoever wins that war is going to find that the village is already occupied, and those occupiers have dug in and are waiting for them," he grunted. "That's why I told Danna to betray the others, to pull the Arcans back *before* the fighting is over, so they can withdraw and dig in. It's also to save our people. DeVaur intends to slaughter every Arcan he sees carrying a weapon, they're a personal insult to his beliefs. He also hopes to capture enough Arcans that didn't actively fight to sell into slavery to make him the richest man in Flaur when he goes back," he mused darkly. "Oh, yes, DeVaur certainly has grand plans and high hopes. It's a shame that I'm going to dash them all."

"Alright, that is little more than what we already know, brother, though I didn't know you told Danna to retreat before the battle ended," Clover noted.

"I told her not to send in the Arcans for any reason, to just stay on the western edge of the city and *threaten*. I told her that the instant the human armies engaged the defenders, to pull her army back and save every soldier she can. I'm sure that the humans will see it for the betrayal it is, but they'll have other things to worry about."

“Betraying the human trust is not a good way to begin our relationship with them,” Dancer noted.

“They have no intention of starting *any* relationship, sister,” Kyven said darkly. “DeVaur’s view and opinions are the *rule*, not the *exception*. He’s not the only general with hopes of lining his pockets with chits brought in from selling Arcans into slavery. Besides, we have no reason to trust any of them. They won’t take the Arcans seriously until they get their asses kicked by them, and they’ll never accept the Arcans as equals. Not in this lifetime,” he declared grimly. “That change of heart has to come from their children, not from them. That’s why Andra’s task is going to take most of her life. She’ll be swaying those that come after the ones here now.

“A task not suited for an Arcan. We don’t live as long as humans do,” Dancer mused.

“I beg to differ, sister. Your lifespan may be shorter, but the Arcans *live* more of their life than the humans do,” he replied with a smile. “Half a human’s life is spent in childhood or adolescence, where they’re told what to do. Arcans spend most of their lives as adults, and that counts for much more than it does humans. Besides, there aren’t all that many humans older than Arcans. Most humans die before they reach sixty. An Arcan may only live forty or fifty years, but those years are much higher quality than human ones are.”

“That’s an interesting observation,” she chuckled, tapping her muzzle.

“Anyway, that’s what’s going to happen, despite what all the humans *think* will happen,” he told them as Vasha rose back up and pranced a bit. “We’ll betray the humans before they betray us, let them fight among themselves, then take them on when whoever’s left limps into Atan. We hold the mountain passes as long as we can, then if needs be, we pull back to the western forests and grasslands and stall them until winter. Then we just let the winter kill them for us,” he said simply. “While all that’s going on, I’ll be starting an Arcan rebellion in Flaur, among other things.”

“What other things?” Clover asked.

“Oh, keeping the kings honest, for one,” he replied. “I have contact with all twelve of them. The only one that I’d even come close to trusting is Alak. He’s idealistic and fears his nobles too much to do what’s right over doing what’s popular, but he’s at his core a kind and compassionate man. I’ll be keeping the human kingdoms milling around like ants for a while, and we’ll see where the soldiers of the Loreguard end up going. If they try to maintain the Loreguard, I’ll have to do something about them, I suppose.”

“And you were doing all of this, making all these plans, while never intending to tell any of us?”

“Only if it was needful, and I needed to do it now,” he replied. “With my plans changing, I needed to warn you of what’s coming, because I won’t be here to keep a personal eye on them as much as necessary.” He chuckled. “Besides, the shadow fox is a solitary spirit, doing her own thing often in the face of the others. I’d be a poor totem not to be just like her,” he said with a light smile. “She believes that the course the other spirits have set is wrong, and she tasked me to make sure things turn out right. I’ve had to actively work against the other Shaman from time to time, but as you can see, I wasn’t doing it out of contrariness or arrogance. I simply agree with my spirit, and if I didn’t believe she was right, I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing. I’m sorry, sisters, but I believe that you are wrong. The humans and Arcans can coexist, but it’s going to take a long time before the humans are ready for it. We can’t negotiate our way out of this.”

“Well, brother, fighting the humans was something we knew we’d have to do,” Dancer protested.

“But you won’t do it the way it needs to be done, sister,” he replied immediately. “The spirits want this war to be as gentle on the humans as possible, to do as little damage as possible, and that’s just not going to work. And in a way, it’s not something you should be doing. Just leave that part to me, and don’t ask too many questions. If you knew what I fully intended to do, you may try to stop me, and I’m afraid I’d have to do

something about that. I love you two, and I'd hate to be put in a position where I'd have to fight my own sisters."

"You speak like you're planning something sinister."

"You don't know the half of it," he said with complete candor. "I've only told you what you need to know. There's going to be a lot going on that you *don't* need to know. You or the others."

"Now you worry me, my brother," Clover fretted.

"Don't worry, I won't get too outrageous, sister," he promised. "But when you need dirty work done, you send in someone not afraid to get his hands dirty. This is part of what my spirit prepared me to do. I fully understand *why* it must be done, and that's the only reason I'm going to do it. I'll hate it with every fiber of my being, but it has to be done. And sometimes, we must do what we don't want to do in the furtherance of our goals," he said with a set jaw. "I will be the villain," he said distantly, looking up at the sky through a break in the trees. "But it's a burden I've accepted, because what history may believe of me won't matter as much as the results my actions produce. Mankind will curse my name for a thousand years, but the Arcans will be free. And I can live with that," he said with simple dignity.

"And Andra will be the shining light banishing your darkness," Clover said with a sideways look at him.

"That's part of it," he said, patting Vasha on the shoulder. "She can't be a hero without a villain, can she? Just promise me one thing, sisters. Promise me that when this is over, you remember what I've said tonight. Remember it. And remember that this was *not* something I was enthusiastic to do. But I am a Shaman, and I am needed. Even when what is needed of me is something that goes against the very tenets of our order. I will be the villain," he said, almost to himself, looking down at Vasha's mane.

Clover looked at him for a long moment, then she glanced over at Dancer. "Well, I forgive you, brother," Clover said with a gentle smile. "I

have known you longer than the others, and I know your heart. I could not believe you to be the villain, even if you act like one.”

“That means a lot to me, Clover.”

“I can forgive you as well, my brother, but if I am to show you that trust, then can you not show equal trust in me?” Dancer asked.

Kyven sighed, glancing at her. “My original plan was basically the same as the council’s, to first try to negotiate the release of the Arcans from a position of strength, trading crystals and other goods for their freedom, you know, basically buying them out of slavery. It would be the way to save the most lives. But, if that failed, then I was to manipulate the council into having the Arcans march into human territory to force them to let them go. But now I’ve been given the wisdom to see that it was the wrong approach. It may free the Arcans, but it won’t *change* the way the humans see them, and that’s absolutely critical. The humans have to accept that the Arcans are no longer slaves, and unfortunately, the only way that’s going to happen is by force, when the Arcans in slavery rise up and *show* the humans that they are slaves no longer. So, I’m going to be using the chaos of the war to free the Arcans as a great rebellion that sweeps across the continent, which will also put further pressure on the human kingdoms. Their armies will be busy trying to secure the crystals they need, but then the Arcans will rise up within their own territory, forcing them to divert forces and assets to deal with us. I once joked that I’d be a poor choice to lead Arcan slaves,” he chuckled. “Irony, that. I’m going to start at the southern tip of the Flauren peninsula and then work my way north.”

“You’ve told us all that, brother.”

He sighed. “I will be the Shaman that frees the Arcans, and I *won’t* be nice or gentle about it, sister. I don’t think you understand the scope of my plans or intent. I don’t intend to leave a single Arcan in a collar *anywhere* in Noraam, and I’m not going to just sneak the Arcans out. There’s going to be columns of smoke rising up behind us,” he said with dark eyes. “The actions I take will effectively cause human civilization on Noraam to

collapse. The sudden removal of the slaves that grow their food and their cotton, paired with the loss of the crystals and their armies away fighting the Arcans of Haven, is going to send all twelve kingdoms into something approaching total anarchy. Hundreds of thousands will die of famine and pestilence, and it'll all be because of *me*. Andra will be the Shaman that helps the humans put everything back together after I'm done. I was born to destroy human civilization on Noraam," he sighed. "Andra was born to rebuild it. I will be remembered as one of the darkest villains in human history, and Andra will be one of their greatest heroes."

"I don't think you will destroy human civilization, my brother," Clover said with a gentle smile. "You will definitely throw it into chaos, but not destroy it."

"Thanks for that much, sister," Kyven smiled wanly. "I in no way look forward to this," he said grimly. "I was hoping to avoid this, at almost any cost, but my spirit got tired of my intractable nature," he sighed. "A Shaman must do what must be done, even if he doesn't like it. A lot of Arcans are going to die, and I'm going to spread chaos and misery across Noraam, but there's no other way."

"Well, you will not go alone, brother," Dancer said seriously. "When you go to start this, I will be with you."

"As will I," Clover agreed. "You'll need other Shaman with you. I see wisdom in your words, and I agree that this rebellion will be necessary. If not to free our people, then simply to force the humans to divide their resources, which will help protect Haven. And it gives our enslaved brothers and sisters a chance to fight for their freedom," she declared strongly, raising a fist. "A chance to earn what is rightfully theirs! We long feared that the humans would slaughter the enslaved Arcans as retaliation if we moved, but if *we* free them first, then they won't have the chance."

"Too right," Dancer agreed, nodding her head. "Besides, Kyven, you are *our* Shaman," she said with a slight smile. "We can't let you go around without us. Why, you'd have no one to serve!"

He chuckled. "I am ever at your service, sister," he told her lightly.

"Good," the red vixen Shaman declared, vaulting up onto Vasha's back and settling in behind him. "Then begin serving me and carry me like the queen I am."

He laughed earnestly as she put her arms around his waist. "So, you really forgive me?"

"We'll talk more about what you've done, but I can't argue with the results, Kyven," Dancer replied. "We are in a good position with hope for the future. If your actions helped get us here, then I can only thank you for it."

"The spankings will come later," Clover added, which made him laugh.

"You realize that if you go with me, you doom yourself to my fate," he said seriously. "To be remembered in history as the worst of the worst."

"I can live with that," Clover said with a smile.

"You don't understand, sister. *You* will be held responsible for what *I* do, because you were with me. And I told you, I will not be nice. The atrocities I commit will be put on your shoulders as well as mine. The other Shaman may very well cast you out."

"Well, I don't believe it's going to come to that, brother," Clover replied.

"I do," he replied immediately, looking down at her with grim eyes. "Both of you think about that. If you go with me, you share my fate. And I will tell you right here, right now, it will not be a good one. Infamy will be the least of your problems," he warned darkly.

"If I must sacrifice myself to save my people, then so be it," Dancer said simply, patting his stomach with both hands. "It is something I would do gladly."

“Don’t answer now. There’s still time before I start the rebellion. Think about it. Think very carefully, then tell me where you stand when it’s time. All I ask is that you don’t tell the others. If they knew I was intending to go out there and cause chaos and terrorize innocent humans, they’d try to stop me. It would go against the wishes of the spirits.”

“But it doesn’t go against the wishes of *your* spirit,” Dancer added.

“I’m a totem Shaman, sister. I only answer to *her*,” he said simply. “Just think about it, my sisters. I love you both very much, and I don’t want you to walk into this without taking the time to thoroughly think it through and make completely and totally sure that it’s a sacrifice you’re willing to accept.”

“I’ll think about it, brother, but I think I already know where I stand,” Clover told him, reaching up and patting his leg. “If you are to shoulder a heavy burden, then I will help you carry it. It is the Shaman way.”

“Damn right it is,” Dancer agreed, squeezing him around the middle gently.

Chapter 22

The rain suited his mood perfectly.

It had started around dawn, after a brief rest and a very long and involved discussion with both the girls and his nannies, and had persisted through most of the day. It had slowed down everyone, even Danvers, but not nearly as much as the human armies, whose trailing column got mired down by the mud churned up by the front of the column, slowing their march to a crawl. But Kyven and the Shaman didn't much mind the rain, even though he was soaked riding atop Vasha, water dripping out of his black hair and from his clothes, lost in thought, lost in plans for what was to come, and dreading every minute of it.

But what else could he do?

He sighed, watching a solitary deer bound across the road ahead of them. They were on a back road that moved north, the hamlet of Oakville behind them, part of the crisscrossing mesh of tiny hamlets and villages in the western Territories that abutted the foothills of the Smoke Mountain, along the Green Hills that formed the eastern edge of the Green Valley. These were roads that only the locals and Clover knew, but where a local might only know the roads within twenty minars of his village, Clover knew them all, and she guided them along a zigzagging path that was supposed to minimize their contact with whatever Loreguard patrols might be in the area, but the reality was that they kept encountering Loreguard almost every hour. There were scouts on every road, track, path, and game trail along the Green Hills as the Loreguard searched for any movement from Danna's army, which they knew was in Atan, and knew would not stay there forever.

It would begin tonight, but thank the spirits, what was coming tonight wasn't going to be anything he dreaded doing. He intended to try to get the

Loreguard to surrender, and if that didn't work, foment some desertion among the ranks. Every soldier he convinced to leave Avannar was one less man that was going to get slaughtered, and besides, those soldiers deserved to know the truth, to know exactly who they were fighting for and how they were wrong for doing it. There were good men among the Loreguard, men that would object to what the Loremasters had planned had they known, men that Kyven would rather not have to kill. Those men weren't really his enemies, at least not yet. They might become his enemies when he started freeing the Arcans, but he would rather give them a chance.

Andra would need good people around her when her time came.

So many things were coming. He could only wonder at how things would be when it was over, when the Arcans were free and Haven was faced with the difficult challenge of feeding and housing them all; their population would quintuple once the enslaved Arcans were free. He wondered how the humans would cope with the loss of their slave labor, how long it would take for famine to set in, how many would succumb to the diseases such famines cultivated like a farmer of death, tending his fields with tender care and attention. He wondered just how the human armies would react once Avannar fell, and the allies suddenly became enemies. He wondered at how they would take the betrayal of the Arcans, who would, if he had his way, not even fire a single shot.

Betrayal. There was going to be plenty of that going around in the next few days.

They stopped at a creek that had risen, racing high and fast in its bank, and he dismounted to let Vasha drink and graze a little. He patted Ebony on the shoulder as she came up to the creek, smiling, and sat on the soggy grass...which didn't make much difference, since he was just as wet as the grass was. He opened his eyes to the spirits and created an illusory map of the western Territories, the map Danvers had shown him, checking on their progress and seeing how far they were from Atan. Clover talked to Danvers, warning him of all the scouts on the roads, and Kyven ruffled Dauro's fur when the massive, pony-sized soggy animal padded in from the woods. He

wasn't sure if the two Lupans would follow him all the way to Flaur, but he'd miss them if they didn't. They weren't his pets, but in a way, they had become part of his family.

And they were the *small* Lupans in the pack. The alpha Lupan was the size of a horse.

"We'll have to strike out cross country if we want to avoid all the scouts, General," Clover said into the talker. "So far they haven't discovered us, because we see them coming long before they notice us. The Lupans are invaluable for sniffing them out, even in this rain," she chuckled.

"Just be careful, dear friend, those scouts will no doubt challenge you if they discover you," Danvers warned.

"Do you want us to start dealing with them?" Clover asked.

"No, the last known locations of missing scouts draws a line on a map that any general with a brain can follow," he replied. "The Loreguard requires their scouts to call in once an hour with their location, so eliminating scouts just draws them right to you."

"We could use that to misdirect them," Dancer mused. "Attack scouts on a different route."

"We may do that, but not yet," he replied. "Just do your best to evade them. How are the road conditions?"

"Deteriorating," she replied. "There's little traffic, but the rain's been falling in this area all day, so it's saturated everything."

"Same here," Danvers grunted into the talker. "Are the rivers and creeks overflowing yet?"

"Approaching that," she replied, looking at the swelling creek. "I'd give the creek I'm looking at right now another hour, and it's going to be hard to cross."

Danvers was quiet a moment. "I'm going to call a halt," he warned them. "I don't like losing the time, but I also don't want to lose anyone trying to cross a river. You should find someplace dry to hole up for the night, my friends. We'll see how the weather is in the morning."

"This looks as good a place as any to make camp," Clover said, looking around. "Once we get some distance from the creek, anyways. I don't want it to rise and flood us out in the night."

"Shaman?" Ebony asked, looking down at Kyven. He nodded, patting Dauro's flank, and Ebony hurried up to Vasha's side, pulling out the tents. They retreated about 50 rods from the creek bank, on top of a grassy little rise that was a large natural meadow in the forest, no doubt having been made by a farmer years ago, but the farmer had died or moved away, his house had rotted away or was over the ridge on the far side of the large meadow, and the trees had yet to fully reclaim the area he cleared. Such was the transience of life and the irony of memory, for the land was quick to forget those who tread upon it, and almost seemed to work to eradicate all traces of those memories from itself, returning to the condition in which it had been beforehand. Kyven helped them set up tents, then he sat down in his tent after using magic to dry himself off and prepared for the night to come.

He had two things to do tonight. First, he had to take a trip west. Then, he'd go to Avannar and see what he could do to sow desertion among the Loreguard. That would be the hardest thing, since the Loreguard was very well trained, and they'd be resistant to Kyven's cajoling...but there were lots and lots of involuntary conscripts in that army as well, and they wouldn't be quite so disciplined. He could frighten them into desertion, and would have to rely on calm words to try to sway the Loreguard forces. With Avannar doomed, now came the final pieces to move on the board to set things up the way that Kyven wanted them before he moved in for the kill.

"Heavy thoughts?" Striker asked as he looked in. He was dripping wet from the rain, which had only intensified over the hour that they'd set up camp.

“Pretty much,” he replied. “Why are you standing out in the rain?”

“Where else would I be as I keep watch? I can’t see much from a tent,” he grinned in reply.

“Well, since you’re here, warn the others that I’ll be gone all night. If you have to pack up and move, I’ll find you.” He sighed and rose up onto one knee. “And I’d better get going. I have a long way to go and a lot to do.”

Striker nodded. “I’ll warn Ebony.”

As his friend went to tell Ebony, Kyven vanished from the tent and entered the shadow world. Covered in shadow, hidden from the *things*, he moved twenty large steps to the west, traversing the majority of the continent in barely five heartbeats, twisting the shadow world enough for the dangerous denizens to take notice of it. He stopped when he found himself looking at the Arcans called the Snow Mountains, rocky, formidable mountains so named because they had snow capping their highest peaks at all time of the year. He knew it was somewhere here, along this rugged chain of mountains, most likely hidden underground. The Loreguard knew where it was, and Kyven had managed to glean that information out of the many papers he’d read. But, directions in a report weren’t the same as actually being there.

It took him nearly an hour to find it, moving slow step by slow step within the shadow world and searching for an open space that had darkness within it among the mountains, a place that was artificially hewn out of the rock, not a natural cavern. He couldn’t see into a place that was nothing but darkness, since shadow required light as much as darkness to *be* shadow, but the darkness itself would be present in the shadow world as a *place*, where the solid rock would appear as nothing but invisible nothingness. The large underground complex could be sensed from the shadow world thusly.

He stepped out of the shadows in front of a massive, almost unfathomably large metal door set in the face of a rock wall. Time had scoured its surface, leaving it rough and pitted, but it had not rusted. A

thousand years of wind and sand had eaten away at its surface, however. Surprisingly cold, biting wind howled around him, funneled down a narrow pass leading to this door, the steep slope behind him long ago fallen away, which had once held one of their roads. The door looked unmoveable, and after all this time it probably was, corroded and eroded by a thousand years of exposure to wind, rain, sun, and temperature. The rock around it was weathered, there was a pile of dirt and talus at the base of the door nearly ten rods tall, but the door itself was nearly thirty rods high and forty rods across, so huge that twenty horses could ride through that opening side by side if the door were open.

He could almost *feel* the pain and suffering behind that door. It was a palpable thing, an echo trapped within for a thousand years, the pain of those who had been sacrificed to become Arcans. The shock as they died, the feeling of betrayal, of outrage, they almost seeped out of the door like a mist of negative emotion, bottled up for a thousand years, and the sensation made Kyven honestly reluctant to get past that door and go in there. He didn't believe in ghosts, but then again, just a few years ago he didn't believe in spirits either. Just because he didn't believe in them didn't mean they couldn't be real, and if any place could be haunted, what he was sensing coming through that door made this place one hell of a suitable place for it.

She told him he had to understand the past to move into the future. She had taught him how to read the language of the Ancients. It was abundantly clear to him that *this* was what she wanted him to do. The origins of the Arcan race and much of the Great Ancients would be behind that door, sealed away from the world, frozen in time since the day that the massive door was closed. Oh, he was fairly sure that the inside was in ruins, that time had found a way inside, but he was also sure that there had to be *something* left inside, something from which he could learn, something that would help him in his task. He had to find it, and also, he wanted to find that machine and move it if possible, destroy it if he couldn't. The Loremasters wanted it, and if they managed to somehow survive his plans and rebuild, they would come after it again. Because of that, and the danger

that it posed, the machine had to be moved to Haven, where they could dismantle it. And if he couldn't move it, he'd find some way to destroy it.

But first, Kyven would study it. How they made it was something he wanted to know, since they had had no idea what the spirits were back then. How they built a machine of alchemy when they had no Shaman, it was a strange paradox now that he thought about it.

Kyven covered his mouth with a scarf that he brought, unsure of what was in there, then he shadow walked through the door and into utter, total darkness. There was absolutely no light, and there was no sound but what he made himself, his own breathing, even the beating of his heart. In this tomb of blackness and silence, even the whisper of cloth against cloth was loud and unwelcome. He pulled an alchemical spotlight from his belt and activated it, tasted strangely fresh air that smelled *dead*, not dead as in rot and decay, but dead as in completely devoid of anything he would attribute to *life*. This air had been trapped in here for a thousand years, and instead of smelling like rocks or like a cave, it instead smelled...*sterile*. There were no smells, absolutely no smells at all, just...air. The air didn't even smell of dust or rock, and it was bone dry, so dry that it made his lips chap after just a couple of breaths, drawing the moisture out of them and making him blink several times to replenish his eyes

Pure air. He lowered his scarf and realized that. Something, something in this base was keeping the air clean, absolutely pure, even removing the dust from it. Something that was still working *after a thousand years*!

The chamber into which he stepped was a huge roadway more than a chamber, the entry into the mountain, and he was standing upon a roadway of artificial rock, black and grainy, that had stripes painted upon its surface. There was no dust anywhere, and both the roadway and the walls were clean, so clean that it almost seemed to him that he had stepped not through the door, but backwards in time. Something in here was keeping this place clean and in good repair, either dwellers here or some kind of alchemical device. He cast about with his senses, and while he couldn't feel any alchemical devices about, there was...something. He couldn't explain it.

There was a faint aura of spirit magic about this place, a feeling that saturated the air, the walls, even the rock beyond them, very subtle, so subtle that he hadn't noticed it until he actively went looking for it.

Perhaps...perhaps that machine wasn't the *only* thing in here that had survived the Breach.

Drawing his shockrod with his other hand, the one upon which he fell back when he expended all his magic, Kyven carefully, quietly padded down that long tunnel, wary and alert, unsure of what was around. But there were definitely things about to capture his attention, since he could read the writing on the walls. One scrawled across the road read ***SPEED LIMIT 20***, which seemed a warning for their vehicles to go slow, he assumed. Another on the wall, at the height of a man, read ***SAFETY FIRST!*** and just a few rods past that one was a large metal banner hanging off the ceiling that read ***CHECKPOINT AHEAD***. Just where that was was lost in the gloom ahead, and the only sound reaching him was his own breathing and the soft steps of his boots on the stone floor, but in this place, that sound echoed off the walls like he was a hundred men in hard-soled boots marching in step.

He found the checkpoint, a little building with gates that came down over the roadway to block movement to large vehicles, and after intensifying his light and sending it down the tunnel, he saw that behind it the road continued for about a hundred rods and then split into three directions. He ducked under the gate and looked into the little building, with large windows, and to his shock, there were *papers* inside! He fumbled with what looked like a latch and then got the door open, finding the inside actually smelling of paper and wood rather than utter sterility, though the air inside was just as utterly dry as the air outside. He picked up a bunch of papers connected to a little brown board with a metal spring-loaded clip and looked at it. He could read it, saw that it was a log of vehicles that passed by the checkpoint, a column dedicated to ensuring that proper identification was displayed for anyone entering the underground base. There was a calendar on the wall, a calendar from a thousand years ago, turned to the month of June in the year 2047, and there was a strange little display, like a dark window of sorts, sitting on the desk in front of a rectangular device

that had a series of buttons marked with the letters of the alphabet and several other symbols, and a little oval device that looked like an egg cut in half longways. He picked it up and saw that it had a tiny little piece of glass on its flat underside. What it was, he had no idea.

What he did learn from the little building was that there were a *lot* more vehicles leaving than arriving, at least there at the end. Kyven assumed that these papers were the records of what was the last day, and on that day, it looked like the base was evacuated. Many, many vehicles leaving, only two coming in.

He continued on until he reached the three-pronged fork in the road, reading the signs, which weren't much help. The signs assumed that anyone that was here would know what the codes meant, for one road read to Block A, one road led to Block B, and the last road led to Block C. He decided to go left, to Block A, figuring that he'd thoroughly explore the place no matter what, even if he found what he sought. He was here to learn, and to learn, he had to explore.

The passage led to a large main room that then opened up into a maze of small, interconnecting rooms that almost looked like a hostel, or an inn. There were things strewn on the floor, a table overturned, showing that on that last day, they fled this place in great haste, not taking everything. He knelt and picked up what looked like a little child's toy, a stuffed bear that crackled in his hand, then split open and caused white fluff to pour out of it. The total lack of water in the air had dried it out, made it brittle, he realized.

A child's toy in a military base? Then again, he remembered his spirit telling him about the end time for the Great Ancients, that they were sacrificing their own children, even infants, to the machine to create Arcans. Anyone who could not fight was sacrificed to create someone who could.

He looked around the large room that seemed a hub for a series of small bedchambers, still holding sheets on their beds, and realized that this was where they held the people that were going to be killed. They waited here, unaware of what was going to happen to them, and that meant that if

he looked around, he would find many things to entertain or distract them, keep them calm, keep them compliant until the day they were taken out and would never return. He looked at the remains of the toy on the floor, and a shiver ran through him when he considered that a thousand years ago, a little girl might have been holding that toy, maybe clutching it for comfort as the adults all ran around in a hurry, unsure of what was happening. And then he wondered how many other little hands had held that bear, hands that had been pulled down a dark hallway and into oblivion, before it came down to that little girl that just might have survived this place....

But probably had not lived long afterwards.

Going on logic, if Block A held those yet to be killed, then Block B held the machine itself, and Block C was where they kept the newly created Arcans, taught them what they needed to know before they were inducted into the army for further training. After all, those neophyte Arcans, being animals originally, wouldn't even know how to talk. They'd be like infants, but fully grown, physically powerful infants.

Searching Block A gave him no confirmation, since what was left was carefully edited to prevent those who'd been here from knowing the truth. It was indeed a holding area for the people slated for death in the machine, and everything about the place was designed to keep them calm, even comfortable, with many activities, many entertainment rooms, and play areas for children. He found a few "guest lists" in control rooms, found a pamphlet of sorts on a table in a room that had many cleaned-out shelves titled *Your New Life: What You Need to Know About the RC Project*. Another he found on a bedstand in one of the rooms was titled *RCS or RCN? It's Your Choice!* but what was definitely the most creepy was one he found in a child's play room, done in bright colors and using a cartoon caricature of an Arcan that was titled *You'll Be a Grown-up Soon!*

That one made him recoil, throwing it down like it was a live snake.

How could those who ran this place do it? How could they look into the eyes of a child and know that they were sending them to their doom?

They didn't know. He realized that even those here in the base didn't know exactly what happened to those that were put into that machine. He had no doubt that they believed just like the victims that the people that went down that long hallway he found that led to Block B would return as Arcans. The operators of the machine may not have even known, probably only those who built it and those who ran this place knew the truth.

But someone *did* know, and that someone was a damned soul.

The passageway into Block B took him from a warm, cheerful place to a place of military sterility and cold function. Gone were the playrooms and the toys and the entertainment devices and games, and in their place were holding areas filled with long benches, chutes for clothing that dropped down into lower areas of the base, and a room that held a series of baskets sitting on walls, some of them still holding things. He took one down at random and realized it was the personal effects of someone that had gone on to their doom, for it held a small knife with a folding blade—which went right into Kyven's pocket since the device was still in perfect working order despite its great age—some pieces of paper, and a leather wallet of sorts that broke apart in his hand, the leather drying out over the centuries and turning brittle. He also found a picture, a picture of a handsome older woman with her arms over the shoulder of a dark-haired young man, both of them smiling. Past that room was yet another room filled with seats, with a desk of sorts inset into the wall facing them, and a single heavy, ominous-looking door that went on.

That was the last room before reaching the machine. Kyven stopped when he stepped into the room holding it, for the room was so big that most of Atan could fit inside it. From what little he could see using his light, it had a domed ceiling that was a hundred rods over the floor at its highest point, and what confronted him was a huge pillar of metal that had a set of doors leading into it at floor level, when it was pretty clear to Kyven after looking at the base of it that the machine went down into the floor. There was no way out of that domed chamber, just the one door...a stark symbol to Kyven, and maybe some few that came in here, that this was indeed the end. A series of signs to each side of the door into the machine were almost

haunting to him. **REMEMBER YOUR TRAINING DURING THE PROCESS** read one, while over the door was a stern warning; **DO YOUR BEST TO REMAIN STILL AND CALM. THE MORE YOU MOVE, THE MORE DISCOMFORT YOU WILL FEEL.** That made his blood run cold. Kyven opened the heavy door out of curiosity and found himself looking into a chamber layered with what looked like iron, or maybe steel, but there was no rust anywhere, a circular chamber without any decoration.

He could *feel* the horror coming out of that chamber. Those that had died in it did not die peacefully. They died in pain and terror, for in the end, they *knew* the truth, they *knew* what was happening, but by then it was too late. The feeling made him slam the door and put his back to it, as if to hold that horror inside, his other hand on his chest and breathing heavily, trying to master himself, get control again.

If this was the last stop for the human, then below him, he sensed, was the first step for the Arcan.

He shadow walked through the floor and found himself in a wide, low-ceilinged chamber holding the base of the device, where there was another heavy metal door from which the Arcan would emerge. There were three doors out of the room, and there was a padded table next to the door, which was on wheels. They must have put the Arcan on the wheeled table and removed them, he reasoned as he opened that door and looked inside. It looked like the other room, just not as high, but just as featureless.

There had to be something else. Where was the animal placed?

He looked around and found nothing else, then realized that they had to put the animal in that chamber. It didn't destroy both the human and the animal and then create the Arcan, the animal *became* the Arcan.

That discovered, he put his hand on the outside case of the machine itself and tried to assense it. It had no magic in it anymore, but it felt like no alchemical device he had ever touched. Usually when he touched one, he could feel it, feel how the magic flowed through it, but this thing, it was almost a paradox. The pathways for magic inside it were disjointed, chaotic,

almost *random*, and it made no sense to him. But more than that, he wondered at how it got its power. They had no crystals back then, so how did they draw spirit energy into the mortal world?

That was one thing he was here to discover, but it would wait for later.

It took him two more hours to explore B block, because it was where most of what he'd come to learn about was located. The block was where they did all the actual work, and though they'd evacuated, they'd left a few records behind for Kyven to peruse. They were maintenance records in a repair shop that had been stripped of everything but its work tables, leaving empty shelves and vacant bins and drawers. The papers were hanging from the wall, records of repairing something called a transmitter, a list of parts, and a list of names with times by them, a schedule of work. B Block also held the barracks of the military personnel, so he picked through what little was left, finding a few pictures of naked women, a couple of flags with those red and white stripes and the white stars on the blue background in the corner, the flag of the original nation.

Then he found the office, and the first sign of anything that even remotely approached life. It was the office of the commander of the installation, according to the sign on the door, and inside was a body. It had mummified in the bone dry air, turning a ghastly shade of grayish-tan and drawing up, the withered flesh tight against the bones, the fingers gnarled into claws. The side of the head was completely gone, showing grisly gray-white dried tissue within, the remains of the brain, and there was a pistol unlike anything Kyven had ever seen laying on the plush red carpeting by the body. Rust-colored spots were on the wall behind the desk, and there were a few bits of bone and dried, jerky-like flesh littering the carpet in an arc between the body and those spots.

A self-inflicted wound. This man had killed himself.

Kyven knelt by the body and regarded it. He wore a faded green uniform with brass buttons, many faded strips of color on one side, and the nametag was still legible even after all this time. This man had been named

Frasier, and the placquard on the desk gave his full name as General Doug Frasier. One hand was empty, close to his weapon, and the other clutched at a strange little metal device that he couldn't really see. Kyven figured that there must have been a great deal of guilt in this man for him to do this, to end it this way.

The desk confirmed it, for there was a hand-written letter right in front of the chair. Fearing it would fall apart if he touched it, like the bear had, Kyven leaned down and peered at the faded writing:

My darling Rose, I'm sorry it had to be this way. When I took this assignment I knew it would mean a long separation from you, and I have yearned for your touch the way the flower yearns for the sun. You are my light, you are my life, and it has been a living death being down here in this dungeon, this much closer to hell, and being apart from you.

I know I'm breaking my promise, my love, but it's best this way. There's only so many supplies, and they shouldn't be used up on a broken-down old wretch like me. Better for me to give my part of the rations to younger, better people, the people who will rebuild, the people who will be our future. Besides, the military will execute me anyway after they find out what I've done, so I'm just saving them the time and effort.

I've done many terrible things in my life, my love, but this—there was a scrawl where the man had scratched something out—I can't even bring myself to tell you what happened. If this place is closer to hell for being so deep underground, love, then those of us who gave the orders only have a shorter distance to fall to get there. I can only hope that God will forgive me for what I've done, and hope that my last actions bring me at least a little bit of atonement.

I love you, Rose. I love you like I have never loved anyone, and I hope that we find each other in Heaven.

Doug.

He knew. The man had known what he was doing, and at the end, he had found no forgiveness in his heart for himself, so he took the only path he could see before him. He tried himself, and had found himself guilty... then he carried out his self-imposed punishment.

Kyven picked up the pistol. It was blocky, heavy, yet strangely sleek and dangerous-looking. It was engraved, looked to be as ceremonial as it was functional, with swirling designs down the glossy black barrel and black handgrips, and after looking it over, he found that it was called a *Colt 1911 .45*, whatever that was. He had no idea how it worked, but after a thousand years in this bone-dry air, it looked as clean and pristine as the day it fell to the carpet, as if time had not touched it. It had a little lever on one side and a tiny button on the other, and playing with it a little while being careful not to pull the trigger showed him that the tiny lever close to the thumb caused a little case to come out of the bottom, which held several large brass cylinders that looked almost exactly like the rifle cartridges, just not as long. He took one of the bullets out and studied it, then put it back in its little spring-loaded case and put the case back into the grip of the gun, feeling it lock in place. He hit the lever again and made it unlock, put it back, hit the lever and put it back, assuring himself that even after a thousand years, it still worked. There was some creaking going on inside the gun, a thousand years for what oil or grease it had on its moving parts to harden, but it did work.

Well, the gunsmiths at Haven would probably be *very* eager to get their hands on this, a working model of one of the guns used by the Great Ancients. They could take it apart, the Shaman could duplicate the pieces, and then they could build them.

C Block was also a residential area, this one for the Arcans that came out of the machine, and the layout of the place showed just what those Arcans were. The first set of housing was single beds per room with control

stations in each pod, almost like a jail, with heavily reinforced doors and control checkpoints. Past that was another housing area with rooms with four beds each and what looked like schoolrooms, the old English alphabet on a banner over a whiteboard. This was there they educated the Arcans that came out of the machines, at least after they calmed down, he reasoned. The last section was barracks-style housing, large rooms filled with stacked bunks, lockers at the foots of the beds, motivational posters on the walls. Virtually everything in C Block was stripped out, leaving only the rudest of the furniture.

Returning to B Block, Kyven explored the side passages and the lower levels, searching for information about the machine. They had to have alchemists on site to operate and maintain it, and that had to be here somewhere. He padded along utterly silent corridors, still feeling that tingle of magic around him, until he found what he was looking for. It was a large iron door with the words ***RC MAINTENANCE*** painted on it, along with ***AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY***. Beyond was a half-cleaned out warehouse-sized chamber filled with benches and shelves, and it was a chaotic mess. They hadn't cleaned out this room before evacuating. But what they left behind was nothing like anything he'd ever seen before. Plate-like square or rectangular wafers with all sorts of little things attached to one side, with a spiderweb of copper lace bonded to the bottom. Tiny little colored pieces, cylinders with little metal wires coming out of them, little black rectangular things with metal pins in rows along each side, spools of copper wire and what looked like strands of transparent string, a strange flexible clear material, hanging over a bench, these were the leftover pieces of the technology of the Great Ancients, those machines that used the *electricity* that the shadow fox had told him about. But, if this was the repair shop for the machine, what use was this junk? Alchemy didn't use such things.

But, after finding a row of heavy books, he found out that this *was* the shop that repaired the machine. He almost gleefully took one of the books down and opened it, and found that it described a part of the machine as a series of drawings showing its internal structure. But, the more he looked

through it, the more confused he became. The machine used their *electricity*, according to these drawings, but when he touched it, assensed it, he could feel the chaotic pathways for magic within.

How could the device use both their power source and spirit energy? And just *where* did it gets its spirit energy from?

It seemed illogical, impossible, but it had worked...somehow. He was no alchemist—

But he *needed* one if he wanted to figure this out.

Virren. He needed Virren for this.

He decided to go get Virren later, after he was done exploring. There was one more major section to look over, as well as the deepest passageways.

The last major section turned out to be a training area of the military personnel that controlled the facility. There was a long room with targets hanging on the far side, probably where they practiced firing their weapons, and futher down he found a promising door labeled **ARMORY**. He shadow walked through the door, but all he found to greet him were empty racks. He went all through the armory room and found that they'd taken virtually everything, just leaving a single little box-like thing that held bullets laying in the corner, probably dropped and forgotten in the rush, like the one that went into the handle of the pistol, but one that was larger, probably for a rifle. He went through the armory and into another room where it looked like they repaired and maintained the rifles and pistols, for he found several pieces of what looked like a rifle, a barrel here, a stock there, and he found a shelf above eye level that held several boxes of much larger bullets at the very back, missed in the rush to evacuate, longer, thicker, and ending in a wicked-looking point. Bullets for the rifles. He found one of those green glass-like things he remembered from the vision, the green eyepiece over the Arcan's eye, and he set it over his face since it was made for a human being. It fit, letting him see a world tinted in green through one eye and the regular world with the other, which made him a tiny bit queasy at first.

Another room did have something that looked interesting. It was another part of the armory, but here they held those pieces of armor he remembered seeing on the Arcan, hanging in cubbies along the walls. About half the cubbies had at least one piece in them, and when he picked one of the pieces up, he found it was made out of some kind of strange, lightweight material...that shattered like glass as soon as he applied any pressure to it. The thousand years had turned the armor pieces brittle, and were little more than ornaments, a testament to a dead civilization.

He sensed a disturbance in the shadows, and Nightfall stepped out of a gateway just behind him. Behind her, Toby stepped out as well, and he was covered in shadows.

“I see you figured it out,” Kyven noted in a hushed tone that seemed very loud in this place.

“About time,” Nightfall said lightly.

“Ayah, hush, woman,” he replied tartly as the shadows bled away, leaving him standing there nude and in his Arcan body, which made her chuckle. He looked around curiously. “Where we at, Kyv? Ah ain’t nevah seen a place like this befo’.”

“This is the underground base where the Great Ancients created the Arcan race,” Kyven said in a quiet, reverent tone, putting the sand-filled fabric covering that had once been a piece of armor back in the cubby. “I’m searching for whatever they left behind that might help us.”

“Ayah,” Toby said in a whisper. “Why ain’t it all fell to ruin?”

“That’s a good question, and one I’m going to find out,” he replied. “The whole place is like this. The air is bone dry and still, it’s like a tomb, but I’ve only found one dead man, dried up like smoked meat. Most of the things they had here are gone, I found papers that said they evacuated this place at the end, then I guess they sealed it up and left it just as it is now. I’ve found papers and some other things that seemed to have held up over

the centuries, but other things,” he said, pointing at the ruined armor piece. “Some of it will just crumble if you touch it.”

“Then we’d best not touch anything,” Nightfall surmised, looking around.

“I did find one thing that’ll be *very* handy,” he said, pulling the pistol he’d taken out of his belt. “It’s one of their guns, and it’s still working. I bet the gunsmiths can do something with it.”

Toby’s eyes widened when he looked at the blocky piece of black steel, and he grinned widely. “Dayum, Kyv, Ah want one! Did you shoot it? Does it really work?”

“The mechanical stuff all works, but I didn’t try shooting it. I don’t know if the bullets are any good after a thousand years,” he said, putting it back. “There were pieces of other guns in that room over there, it was where they repaired them. But there weren’t enough pieces to figure out how they go together.”

Nightfall, however, wasn’t paying much attention. She was looking around, towards the ceiling, then the floor, and had her hands around her front, all but hugging herself. “I don’t like this place, Kyven,” she told him. “It’s not a nice place. It’s scary.”

“I know, I can feel it too,” Kyven nodded.

“Feel whut?” Toby asked.

“The *horror* left behind here,” he replied grimly. “So much pain happened here, it’s sunk into the very walls, like a residue, like an echo of a scream trapped in this place for all time. This place would make any Shaman shiver.”

“Not just Shaman,” Nightfall said with a low growl.

“Ah don’t feel nothin’, but that don’t mean that there ain’t nothin’ here,” Toby declared. “Ah wouldn’t mind havin’ mah pigsticker right about now.”

Kyven tossed Toby his shockrod. “It’s fully charged, just don’t get stupid with it,” Kyven told him.

“Thanky Kyv, Ah feel better now,” Toby declared, adjusting his grip. “Ah wouldn’t mind goin’ tah look through that gun room.”

“It’s right there,” he pointed at the door. “Nightfall, stay with him, I’m going to go check some other rooms. Be careful, and try not to touch anything unless you’re absolutely sure you can identify it. If it doesn’t fall apart, it might be dangerous. We don’t know what most of this shit is, what it does, or how it works.”

“Alright, Kyven,” Nightfall nodded. She took Toby’s hand and then pulled it around her shoulders.

“So, *now* yo’ gettin’ affectionate,” Toby teased lightly.

“This place is *angry*, Toby,” Nightfall said in a hushed tone. “It doesn’t like us here. I want to leave.”

“We’ll be careful, hon,” Toby said in a much less playful tone, patting her shoulder. “Let’s see what we can see, but if yo’ feelin’ too unsettled, yo’ can go back.”

“Alright,” she said, pressing herself against his side.

Kyven picked through the other three rooms in the armory section, but it was more of the same. Empty shelves, tables, chairs, bins, and very few books or papers, but lots of those black windows and little button-boards with the alphabet on them...they were in every room, almost on every table. They were definitely common, heavily used. He found another calendar with the same month, but this one had days marked off until June 17, 2047. Was the last day they were here? Possible. He left the armory and shadow walked down through the floor rather than try to find the stairs, getting into the lowest levels, and it was here that he felt...something. Something *magical*, that faint sensation he’d felt when he first came in, but stronger. Kyven put his hand on the floor and felt it even more acutely, then he

opened his eyes to the spirits to see if it was something that would show in the spirit world.

It did. There was something magical under him, just at the edge of his vision, below and to the left. He shadow walked through the rock and to where it was, a seething, shifting, violently agitated mass of spirit energy, that got only more agitated as he stepped out into a huge chamber, the ceiling some hundred rods high, dominated by a tremendous machine.

It was another alchemical device. A *second* one, buried in the heart of the mountain, but this one was *working*!

The writing on the machine labeled it as some kind of environmental control system, which was probably why the air in here was bone dry, why things hadn't decayed to dust after a thousand years. This machine was maintaining the base. Looking into it, he saw that it was tapping spirit energy directly out of the spirit world in a tiny breach, a hole punched between the real world and the spirit world, barely more than a pinhole. He stepped up to it and put his hand on it—

—and woke up moments later all the way across the room, smoke wafting out of his hair.

Of course. He was a Shaman, a living conductor of magical energy, and this machine must not have been built with people like him in mind. He shook his head to clear the cobwebs and clawed himself back up onto his feet, feeling a bit woozy, but he sensed the magic of the device starting to fade. Him touching it had upset its workings, and the seething mass of spirit energy trapped inside was bleeding away, because the breach into the spirit world had closed the instant Kyven had touched it. Kyven stepped up to the machine and watched through spirit sight as the mass of energy decayed, retracted, then faded away to nothing, escaping back into the spirit world like mist evaporating before the morning sun.

And the air immediately lost its sharp sense of sterility. Kyven realized that it was the machine keeping it like that, and without the machine, now

the air in this place would turn stale, get dank and musty as water invaded the place, and would ultimately turn poisonous.

But, that was how they did it. They didn't use mana crystals, they breached directly into the spirit world and drew power from the world itself, not any particular spirit. It also explained the Breach, when they built a machine that tried to open a hole that was too big, or they couldn't control it. That had torn the fabric between the two worlds and allowed spirit energy to flood into the mundane world like an avalanche, which then caused that cataclysmic explosion that heralded the end of the Great Ancient Civilization.

So, now he knew how it worked, but it didn't answer how they did it. How did they know about the spirit world? They had no Shaman back then. How could machines detect spirits, since those machines were dead, and only the living could sense a spirit? After all, spirit sight could not see anything that wasn't alive. The spirits and the energy they represented were the energies of life—well, except for black energy, but there could be no death without life—and a machine that was not alchemical would never be able to manipulate or even detect spirit energy.

So, how did they discover alchemy when they needed alchemy to discover it?

It was just another paradox about the Great Ancients, and about this place.

He put his hand back on the machine and assensed it. This machine had none of their technology inside it. It was a pure device of alchemy... which might be why it was still working after all this time.

It did tell him one thing, though. The Great Ancients had been *learning* before they were destroyed. The machine above used their technology in it where this one did not. Either they had learned from the Arcan machine that they didn't need their technology and built this machine, or they had built this machine and then learned that their technology could affect alchemy in some way, and had built the Arcan machine. Either way, the existence of the

two different kinds of alchemical devices showed Kyven that the knowledge of alchemy possessed by the Great Ancients had evolved...but in which direction it evolved, that was the question he wanted to answer.

He explored the last few rooms, maintenance rooms holding the scraps left over from their evacuation. The places with racks and bins had held parts, tools, equipment, and they would need those things out there in the world, so the areas were stripped almost completely to the walls. He found the room where the clothes went from the changing room, filled with nothing but empty shelves and a small closet holding brooms.

That was it. There was nothing left for him to explore. The place had been almost completely emptied out of anything remotely useful, the only thing left behind the pistol in Kyven's belt, and only because, most likely, the man Frasier had made them leave him behind, where he killed himself as a final act of atonement for what he'd done. Outside of those paper books holding the drawings of the machine, the place was almost devoid of records, of information. Where had they kept it all? Had they taken it with them, and just left the machine drawings behind because they were of no use to them out there in the world?

The shadow fox had taught him to read English to come here and learn...what? That there wasn't much here to learn?

No. The machine. That was why she'd sent him here. If anything, he had to destroy that machine, even if there was little chance anyone could ever get in here. That massive door sealing this place in looked all but impregnable, but still, he couldn't take any chances. The Loremasters knew about this machine, and that meant that odds were, others did as well. They may not have known exactly what it was or how it worked, but they were aware of its existence, and for that reason alone, Kyven had to destroy it. But that machine in the deepest chamber, that might be useful.

Toby and Nightfall appeared behind him in the room, Nightfall still all but clinging to the intimidating hunter. "Ayah, we done looked around, Kyv," Toby reported, handing him back his spotlamp. "They ain't much

here, and what is here falls apart if'n yo' touch it. But, Ah think that gun barrel we found, that might be useful. The gunsmiths might be able tah learn something from studying it." He held it up. "Ah got it right heah."

"Those bullets I saw might be useful too," Kyven mused, looking up at the ceiling. "Toby, I need you to be an errand boy, if you don't mind."

He chuckled. "Ah don't mind 'tall."

"Go back and get those bullets, then walk them and the gun barrel straight to Haven. Have the council find the best gunsmith in the city and give them to him."

"Want me tah take that pistol too?"

"No, I'm keeping it," he said. "We have some good smiths in the army, I'll have one of them take it apart and clean it, make sure it works, then Clover and the others can see if they can duplicate it. If I hand it over to Haven, I may never get it back, and I have the feeling I'm going to *need* it."

Toby chuckled. "Smart man."

"Friends, when you leave here, *never* come back," he said with an intense voice. "I'm going to bring Virren here to help, then we're going to destroy the alchemical machine and leave this place a death trap for anyone who tries to get in. So *never* come back, no matter where in the base you try to step in from the shadows. Since I can do it too, I'm going to make sure that nowhere in here is safe. Do you understand?"

"I understand. I'll just be glad to leave this place, and I'll gladly never come back," Nightfall said anxiously, her eyes scanning the darkness. "This place is, is, it's *evil*."

"And that's why I'm going to destroy it," Kyven growled. "So many people died in here, died horribly, it's cursed the very rock around us. This is no place for any sane man or woman."

"Ah still don't feel nothin' 'tall, but Ah'll take yo' word for it, Kyv," Toby said, looking around curiously. "C'mon, babe, let's get these things

tah Haven.”

After they shadow walked out, Kyven blew out his breath. Now he was lying to his closest friends.

He covered himself in shadow and walked out, marching across the continent in mere seconds, then stepped out back in Atan, in the street directly facing Virren’s alchemy shop. It looked just as it always did, but now there were Arcans everywhere, Arcans carrying muskets, pitchforks, polearms, swords, axes, staves, even clubs, anything they could get their hands on. It reminded him that the main army was woefully underequipped, with barely enough muskets for a third of the fighting force, forcing the rest to use whatever they could find. The Shaman could only duplicate so many muskets a day before getting tired, and that was added to what the foundries back in Haven were hastily making and shipping out on the supply trains. There were caravans of loaded wagons in a nearly continuous chain between Haven and Atan, so many that there wasn’t even so much as a pull cart left anywhere in Haven, and when they ran out of wagons, they used mules, burros, domesticated buffalo, and horses as pack animals, and when those ran out, they had Arcan volunteers who literally carried the equipment on their backs the two thousand or so minars between Haven and Atan. It was almost merciless work, carrying hundreds of stones’ weight of equipment all day every day like a pack mule, but they had volunteered for it, and in a way, it was something that they were good at.

That was one reason why he didn’t want Danna to engage at Avannar, to hide the fact that barely a third of the army had muskets. It would just invite the humans to attack Atan in force instead of fearing to try.

The shop was closed for the night, but the lights in the upper windows told him that Virren was still awake. He rang the bell by the door, and almost immediately, the door opened. Two Arcans Kyven didn’t know were inside the entry room. Both were burly, tall, rugged-looking canine Arcans, one a wolf and the other a boxy-muzzled male with tawny fur and no hair. “What business have you?” the wolf asked.

“I need to see Virren,” he replied calmly. He spied Old Gray look in from the doorway in the back of the room. “Old Gray!” Kyven called.

“Well, my old eyes must be playing tricks on me,” he said in a weedy voice, stepping in. “It’s alright, boys, he’s a friend. An old friend,” the grizzled, elderly Arcan said with a smile. The two Arcans stepped out of the way and let him enter, and he stepped up and took the old Arcan’s burn-scarred hands, earned from years of working with red-hot metal. “It’s been a long time, Master Kyven,” he said. That name made the tawny-furred Arcan jump a bit.

“It’s good to see you well, old friend,” he said gently, putting a hand on his shoulder. “And stop with the Master shit, it gets on my nerves,” he chuckled.

“You are the master of the cutter’s shop here, so it’s a perfectly acceptable title,” he smiled, showing a couple of gaps where teeth used to be. “It’s your right as an artisan.”

“That was a different life, Old Gray,” he sighed.

“I know. Will you bless me, Shaman?” Old Gray asked, somewhat formally.

“You, my friend? All day every day,” he replied. The two Arcans at the door gaped a bit when Kyven recited the ritual benediction, then they hurried over.

“We didn’t recognize you, Shaman,” the wolf apologized.

“It’s alright, boys, not everyone knows what I look like. Sometimes I like it that way,” he chuckled.

He didn’t get out of the room without blessing both the guards, then Old Gray led him to the stairs. “Why the guards?” he asked.

“There was some trouble with the villagers when Master Virren’s true sympathies were exposed,” he replied. “Traitor was the kindest of their accusations.”

“Are the villagers still here?”

He shook his head. “Only a handful, like Master Virren. General Pannen had them lock up their houses and shops, and the army leaves them alone. The army camps out near the mines.”

“So nothing’s really changed since the last time I was here,” he grunted as they reached the second floor. “Has Timble and Danna—General Pannen been visiting Virren?”

“Daily,” he answered. “Timble is an old friend, and as the best alchemist in the village, the army has been making use of Master Virren’s forge and talents.”

Virren was in his upstairs study, sitting behind a desk writing in a ledger when Kyven entered the room. He looked up, then smiled brightly and stood. “Kyven!” he greeted exuberantly.

“Hello, Master Virren,” Kyven said, taking his hands over the desk. “It’s good to see you.”

“You here to visit Danna?”

He shook his head. “I need you, Virren. I need your expertise with something, an alchemical device.”

“I’m at your disposal, my friend. What did you bring me to look at?”

“It’s too big to move, I have to take you to it,” he replied. “And you’re not gonna like getting there.”

“Really?”

Kyven nodded. “I have to shadow walk you there, I’m afraid. And most people don’t travel well doing it.”

Virren chuckled. “Let me get my toolbox, then we’ll see about it.”

“Do you need help, Master Virren?” Old Gray asked.

“No offense, old friend, but I’d prefer to only take one. It’s easier on me, and it’s easier on who goes with me.”

“Then good journey, and come home safe,” he nodded, then he closed the door.

After fetching his traveling toolbox, Kyven tied them together with a length of stout rope. “No matter what you do, Virren, do not stop,” Kyven warned. “When you’re inside, you won’t be able to see much past your hand, and what you do see is going to shift and shimmer and move in a way that’ll make you queasy. On top of that, it’ll feel like you’re standing on a plank balanced on a rolling barrel. You’re going to get dizzy and nauseous in there. Just about everyone I walk ends up puking when they get to the other side, so don’t feel too self-conscious about it if it happens to you.”

“I’ll do my best. I just can’t lose this,” he said, hefting his heavy oak box, its corners bound with iron.

“I’ll carry it,” Kyven said, reaching for it.

With a passenger, the *things* took immediate notice of him, but again, they advanced and then pulled up, afraid to get *too* close. He could feel their anger, their hatred, their hunger, but he could still feel their fear. They had yet to think of a way around his ability to literally control their bodies, lock them in paralysis and hold them thus until he was out of the shadow world, and so they were afraid to get too close to him. Eventually, they’d get the idea of all of them attacking him at once, he was sure, hoping that he couldn’t control all of them.

He had a surprise waiting for them when they tried that.

Virren looked much better than most when they reached the utter blackness of the base, back in the maintenance room holding the books, at least to Kyven’s spirit sight. Virren was teetering just a little with a hand on his stomach, then he lurched a little because he was a little dizzy and couldn’t see a thing. Kyven steadied him and set the toolbox down on the floor, a floor he couldn’t see because everything in this place was sterile, no

unseeable life giving that aura of glow on the surface of inanimate objects. It was just as dark to his spirit sight as it was to his regular sight, the only things he could see were himself, the toolbox, and Virren. He turned on his spotlight and made Virren wince, even as he blew out his breath and patted his stomach. “That was almost like riding inside a barrel rolling down a hill, like I did in my youth,” he chuckled.

“You didn’t throw up, that’s one for you, Virren.”

“I don’t get sick that way easily. Now, show me this device.”

“We’ll start with these drawings of its insides,” Kyven said, pointing at the books in the shelf along the wall. “It’s huge, Virren, and it was built before the Breach. It’s from the Great Ancients.”

“Really? Kyven, I may know alchemy, but I can’t figure out something *they* built!” he gasped.

“You’re more of an expert than me,” Kyven shrugged. “And you’re the best alchemist I know, Virren. You’ll understand more of it than I did.”

“Alright,” he said after a moment. “Can we see the device, Kyven? I’d love to see it, just put my hand on it once,” he said reverently.

“I can show it to you, but don’t fall in love with it, Virren. As soon as we finish studying it, I’m destroying it.”

“Why?” he gaped.

“Because it’s *evil*,” Kyven replied with a stony expression. “It’s the machine the Great Ancients used to create the Arcan race, Virren,” he said darkly. “And they did it by *sacrificing* a human being to create the Arcan. That machine killed hundreds of thousands, maybe even millions of people, Virren. When we’re done with it, that blight will be removed from the world forever.”

“Then why are we studying it if we’re destroying it?”

“Because I was sent here by my spirit to understand the past, and in its way, that machine is part of the past, so I need to understand that machine. But, it just doesn’t make any sense, Virren,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s a paradox, it shouldn’t work according to everything I know about alchemy. That thing has their original technology in it, but it also has alchemy in it. I can’t understand how they built something that draws power from something other than mana crystals, especially when they didn’t have any. I don’t see how they could power an alchemical device with anything other than spirit energy.”

“Oh, I think I see what you’re talking about. It’s an alchemical device that shouldn’t even work?”

“Exactly. Just help me figure out how the hell they did it, Virren, then we’ll destroy that evil machine and be done with it.”

They spent several hours poring over the drawings and plans of the machine, and the entire time, Virren kept his brow furrowed. Kyven helped as best he could, then took Virren to the machine itself. They found an access port that Virren opened with tools from his box, and inside was a jumble of thin, vine-like wires, dull metal cases connected to them, and little else.

“This is the strangest thing I’ve ever seen,” Virren noted as they looked in, Kyven using his own spotlight and Virren using one from his toolbox. “It violates every rule of alchemy there is. Are you sure this thing worked?”

“It worked alright,” Kyven grunted, touching one of the colored wires.

“It has no metallurgical recipe. It has no inlaid pathways. This metal looks like it came right out of a forge, untouched by an alchemist’s hands,” he declared, touching the metal case.

“That matters?”

“It matters a great deal,” he replied as he pushed wires aside to look at the metal behind them and the cases. “Alchemy’s not only about the metal, Kyven. It’s as much about how the alchemist shapes the metal as it is about

the metal itself. The better you build the device, the better it functions, you know that.”

“I know, but what if you could build a machine that creates a perfect copy every time?”

“Alchemists have tried that over the years, and the results aren’t what you’d think,” he answered, pulling wires completely out and setting them on the floor. “The devices made from stamped pieces are unpredictable. It works best when each device is built by hand.”

“That’s strange.”

“Not really. No two pieces of iron stock are the same, my friend. It takes the personal attention of the alchemist to adapt to the materials, tailor the stock to the device, so that means that if you want a device that works best, it has to be built by human hands, not stamped from a die.” He grunted and pulled out more wires. “I mix all my alloys myself, either by my own hand or watching my apprentices, so I know exactly what quality materials I’m working with.”

Something about that...just seemed to be off in his mind. In alchemy, the shape of the device, the quality of the materials, and their proportions within the device were the three factors that determined how good it was. All spotlamps, for example, looked exactly the same. They might be larger or smaller, but the basic shape of them was the same, since it was the shape of it that *made* it a spotlamp. Virren had books and books and books of alchemical blueprints at his shop denoting the exact dimensions and shapes of most commonly known alchemical devices, and exactly what metals were used in its composition. All shockrods looked the same, all impact rods looked the same, and so on and so on.

That shape and the composition of the metal that made the device determined how magic flowed in it, and made an alchemical device function. So, if two devices were made from metal poured into a mold, why would they act differently if the metal was poured from the same melted stock? After all, the composition was the same, the shape of the two devices

would be identical. So, what made it different when an alchemist built it by hand? He watched Virren pull more wires out, his strong, scarred hands setting the wires down with surprising gentleness. The burly alchemist was

The *alchemist*.

The alchemist!

It hit him so hard he blinked and flinched. Of course! The alchemist! That was why talkers built by different alchemists couldn't talk to each other! It was because of *the alchemist*!

Kyven laughed loud, so suddenly that Virren banged his head on the top of the access hatch. He grumbled and pulled his head and arms out, giving Kyven a long, slightly stern look. "What's so funny?"

"It makes perfect sense!" he said, standing up quickly and motioning at the device. "That's why this thing worked despite it going against every principle of alchemy we know!"

"What do you mean?"

"It worked because the men who built it *wanted* it to work!" he said, his eyes bright. "But it wouldn't work now, because they're dead, and because the men of today wouldn't understand it, wouldn't believe that it would work if they didn't know beforehand that it did!"

"Kyven, what are you talking about?"

"Alchemy, Virren! Alchemy! Virren, my friend, you're as much a Shaman as I am! Hell, you're probably much better than me, when it boils down to stock!"

"What do you mean?"

"Virren, it's not the *science* of alchemy that makes alchemy, it's the *alchemist*! It's like illusions! It's exactly like an illusion!" he gasped. "It worked because they *believed* that it would work," he said in a calmer tone,

relaxing a little as his mind wrapped around what he was trying to express. “When an alchemist crafts a device, he does it with his own hands, and that, it, well, it *imprints* the belief of the alchemist right into the device. It works because he *believes* it will work, because everything his schooling and his books and his training tells him is that it *will* work. And the belief of other alchemists impacts that fundamental belief,” he elaborated, thinking it through quickly. “Mankind has created a *science* out of their *belief*. When I create an illusion, the belief of *one* has to overcome the disbelief of *others* to make it reach into the real world. The belief of many can shape the illusion...and that’s all alchemy is. It’s an *illusion*.” He pondered it for a moment in silence, then he laughed loudly and ruefully.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Kyven,” Virren said.

“Alchemy is just another form of magic, Virren, but think about Shaman magic a minute,” he said, sitting back down. “You understand it better than just about anyone, since you’re an alchemist and you’ve been friends with Shaman over the years who have talked to you about it. What’s the core aspect of Shaman magic?”

“Strength,” he answered, a little uncertainly. “The Shaman has to be strong enough to handle the magic that flows through him, or it’ll kill him.”

“Not quite, but you’re right about that,” Kyven agreed. “What it takes more than anything else is *willpower*. I have to be strong enough to handle the magic, but it’s my will that makes the magic do what I want it to do. I refine it by using imagery, imagination to direct the magic better, but it just boils down to me *making* the magic do what I want it to do. That’s half the strength you were talking about. Now, think about my illusions,” he said, opening his eyes to the spirits and creating an illusion of Dana in her Arcan form, wearing that wrap he remembered from when she was at Deep River. It was perfect in every detail, and the sense it exuded was almost as if one could touch it. Since he was so familiar with her, he could easily instill the very *substance* of Danna into an illusion of her, and that made it powerful. “Who is this?”

“Danna.”

“How do you know?”

“I have eyes, Kyven,” he chuckled. “That’s Danna.”

“Are you sure?” he asked pointedly. “Are you absolutely sure that it’s Danna, Virren?”

Virren looked at the illusion again, a little harder this time, and as soon as he did so, some of the *substance* of the illusion faltered, as his belief in what he was seeing was challenged. But then that *substance* returned when he made up his mind. “It’s definitely Danna.”

“This is the core of alchemy,” Kyven told him with a smile. “This is Danna because you *believe* that it’s Danna. Alchemy works because you *believe* that it works. Over the years, it’s become a science over being a form of magic, until it became so imprinted into the very psyche of mankind that it evolved into the very science that mankind believed it to be,” he said, almost reverently. “It’s an illusion that people believe so completely that it becomes real,” he realized, then he whistled.

“Kyven, I still don’t understand.”

“No. No, you wouldn’t. And you *shouldn’t*,” he said quickly. “If you really understood, it might ruin your business.”

“Kyv, what do you mean?”

“What it comes down to, Virren, is that you’re such a good alchemist because you *believe* you are, and everyone else believes you are too,” he told him. “It’s your confidence, your belief in your skills and your training, that makes you so good. That’s the hidden truth behind alchemy. Since it’s actually a form of Shaman magic, when you build a device, you’re actually casting a spell, just doing it with hammers and bellows, and your attention to detail, your desire to build the best device you can, your confidence in yourself, that’s your willpower that imbues your devices with their power. That’s why devices out of *your* shop are the best in Atan, Virren. You’re the

best because you *know* you're the best, and because *everyone else* knows you're the best. You're as much a Shaman as me, my friend, you just work in metal and tools, not magic," he smiled, patting Virren's shoulder. "After all, alchemy and Shaman magic use the same energy as its power. It only stands to reason that they'd be more related than people think."

"That doesn't make much sense, Kyven. I'm no Shaman."

"You're not a *real* Shaman, Virren, but you've learned how to mimic Shaman magic using alchemy. That's what I mean. But some of the same requirements for alchemy and magic are there. It's why not everyone can be an alchemist. Shaman are born Shaman, but alchemists are all men of great willpower and discipline, men who have the self-confidence to excel in such a difficult profession. An alchemist isn't just a man who's good with working with metal, he's a man of exceptional mental discipline. It's why a man can be a great blacksmith, but couldn't build an alchemical device to save his life. He lacks that intangible quality that you have, Virren. Mental strength. Discipline. Confidence. Self-assuredness. Those are absolutely mandatory requirements for an alchemist."

"Well, that might be true," he said after a moment. "Most alchemists I know are much as you describe. We're all driven men, perfectionists in our own ways."

"Of course it is," Kyven smiled. "I need to go check something, Virren. Just stay here and keep working, I'll be right back."

He nodded. "Be careful."

Kyven really just needed to end the conversation before he ruined Virren. He had to lie to him so as not to tamper with things.

Alchemy was just an illusion.

That was all it was, and that was why Kyven understood that fundamental truth, because he was a totem Shaman to a spirit whose primary sphere was illusion and deception. Because the belief in the illusions he created was so critical to their working, he understood the

tremendous power that came when a sentient mind decided that that was the way things were supposed to be. It was such a strong force that it could actually alter reality itself, twist what was real and what was not. It was that elusive ultimate power that his totem had described when she first taught him about illusions, to create that perfect illusion that was so powerful, induced so much belief, that it became *real*. It was the belief that made it real, both his belief and the belief of those that viewed it, and it took both of them to make it happen. If Kyven didn't *believe* in his illusion, it would fail just as much as if the victim didn't think it was real either. It was why the shadow fox drilled it into him that he had to believe too, and he invested that belief not with actual pure belief—he *knew* it was an illusion, after all—but with imbuing the illusion with so much *substance* that it could even override his own disbelief in what he was doing, make it feel so real to him that he could accept it as real, accept the reality he forced into the world rather than the reality that was already there.

And he had done it, several times. He remembered the illusory fire that burned the grass in Riyan, the illusion of the fortress doors in Cheston that was so solid that men could push against it, the Wolveran he made that he actually rode, the big monster at Durm that physically knocked down the breastworks. He had brought his illusions into reality more than once, and it was based on both his belief in what he was doing and the belief of those that saw his illusions.

And *that* was alchemy. It worked because men *believed* that it would work, believed so completely that their belief was intruding into the real world, and on a global scale. The concentrated belief of so many that alchemy was real *made* it real, so real that someone with absolutely no concept of alchemy, like a baby, could get hurt by an alchemical device. Though the baby all by himself in a room with an alchemical device had no belief in the device, the concerted belief of *everyone else* made that device work, and that made it just as real as anything else. Their reality shaped the reality of the baby, who would have no inkling of their reality. Their reality intruded into the baby's reality, where the baby lacked the *will* to enforce its version of reality over that which was imposed upon it.

Over the centuries, they had turned it into a science. Men had rationalized it, set rules for it, and it was their collective belief that turned it into the very science that it was, to the point where alchemy was now just as real as anything else, and would remain so for all time. It had been permanently imprinted into reality by the belief of mankind. The belief of man had taken what was an illusion and had permanently brought it into reality, just as the spirit had told him so long ago when she said that the mind perceives its reality, and that perception could have an effect on *all* reality, not just the reality of that one being.

Reality, after all, was nothing but the sentient mind's interpretation of what its senses told it was there. And no two people had the *same* reality, because they didn't see things in exactly the same way. That was the mystery behind linked talkers. That one alchemist's concept of reality was imprinted into his devices, and because of that, no other talker could link to them...because they *had different versions of reality in them*.

Alchemy began as a mass delusion...but after so long, that delusion had become reality, to the point where it was now part of the very natural order of the world. Even after the minds that created it were long gone, alchemy would still exist, because the imprint into the *true* reality beyond the senses was permanent.

This was what she wanted him to learn. He was sure of it. This was important. Maybe not important to anyone else, but for him, this was *critical*, because it showed him just how powerful belief could be. So long as he could approach the world with the innocent wonder of the baby, yet have the will to force *his* reality over the reality imposed upon him, his illusions would become real.

He had to *reject* reality in order to *accept* reality.

It had opened his eyes to the *potential* of illusion, a potential far greater than anything he had ever considered before. It showed him that while his shadow powers had grown, evolved, seemed to outclass his Shaman powers, they were not his greatest power. The power of illusion was his greatest

power, because it was truly a power with no limits other than what he could imagine, as long as he had the willpower behind it to force his reality upon others.

And learning the truth of alchemy had expanded his imagination vastly. The possibilities...they were, were *endless*.

Now he understood, understood on a level he had never understood before, just how powerful the power of illusion could be. It was about more than just making people see things that weren't there, it was about imposing his own version of reality on others. And if he could make them believe in *his* reality, then they would conform to it. Even if his reality violated every tenet of the reality the victim held in his heart. As long as he could make them *believe*, they would be forced into *his* reality.

It was so, so *simple*, yet sometimes, the simplest of things were the hardest to understand. Reality was not real. Reality was nothing but what was in the mind, and reality was not the same for everyone. Nothing was *real*, not in the way people believed it to be. Men *made* their reality, shaped it with their minds, reinforced it with the cooperative belief of other minds that formed the fundamental laws and workings of what they perceived. There was something underneath it all, the way things *really* worked were there not a single sentient mind in the world, nature at its basic level. That was the base upon which men formed their reality, interpreting this raw, primordial reality and shaping it to their belief, forced nature into *their* reality rather than nature pulling them into its own.

Alchemy was one of those things. It was something that did not exist, yet was *made* to exist by the belief of sentient minds that accepted that which was not real as real, and that belief *made* it just as real as the sun in the sky or the wind in their hair.

That was where Kyven was different. He had to approach the world as the baby, with no preconceptions, but he had the *will* to override what the other minds in the world tried to force upon him. He could reject their

reality, and substitute it with one of his own, so long as he *believed* that he could.

She had told him that the power of illusion was limitless. Now he *understood* that, understood it at its most fundamental level.

Because now, now, *he believed*.

She was there. He looked down at her, down into her glowing emerald eyes, and she simply regarded him, seated sedately and with her tail wrapped around her legs, that pose he knew oh so well.

“I know what to do, sister,” he replied with a solemn nod. “Thank you.”

She blinked only once, did not move, and then the penetrating blackness around him swallowed her up, and she was gone.

He returned to Virren and knelt down, seeing nothing but Virren’s backside and legs. He had crawled halfway into the device. More than ever, Virren was going to be critical now. He was an alchemist. He could build alchemical devices.

He could help Kyven use mankind’s belief against him, to help him exceed his own limits as an illusionist. Kyven believed. Virren would help him make *others* believe.

“We’re about done here, Virren,” he said. “Is there anything more you wanted to do?”

“A little,” he replied. “Mind if I take some of this home with me to study? Their technology.”

“I don’t mind,” he replied. “But without their power, none of it’s going to work.”

“I don’t mind, I think it’ll be interesting just to look inside one of these boxes,” he said, tugging again, and Kyven heard something give inside the

hatch, a series of metallic sounds. “I can take the books about the machine, but I can’t read their writing,” he replied.

“No, we leave the books here, my friend. The Loremasters were sending men out to study this thing, so we can’t leave anything out anywhere where them or people like them try to learn more about it.”

“Well, then I guess I’m about done, at least as soon as I get this piece out,” he said, tugging a little.

“Alright. When we get back, Virren, I need you to do something for me...at least after we both get some sleep.”

“Anything, my friend. What do you need?”

“I need you to build me an alchemical device. It has to be your best work, Virren. It’s going to be important.”

“What’s it going to do?”

“Save the Arcans,” he replied simply as Virren tugged a long, thin rectangle out of hole, wires still dangling from it. “I’ll give you the blueprint for you as soon as I get it. I have to go fetch it from Avannar. It’s something they have in their vaults, and I figured it was safe to leave it be. After all, I know where it is, and they certainly wouldn’t let something like that out of their sight.”

“Sounds dangerous.”

“Not dangerous at all, just something they never wanted to see built,” he replied. “So much so that they killed the alchemist that invented it.”

“What does it do?”

“It’s best that you don’t know that, for your own good,” Kyven told him. “But I wouldn’t have any other alchemist do it, Virren. You’re the best.”

“Not the best, but I do try,” he said modestly.

“Okay, you may not be the best, but you’ll build it for me and not ask too many questions,” he winked.

Virren laughed. “Aye, I can do that,” he agreed, standing up and picking his prize up off the floor. “Now let’s get down to the task of destroying this thing so we can get back, my friend. It’s probably almost dawn by now.”

“I know, I totally messed up my errands,” Kyven chuckled. “I had much more to do tonight, but I got hung up on this. But the other things can wait until tomorrow. Avannar’s certainly not going anywhere.”

“How are we going to destroy it?”

“Fire,” he replied. “It’s too big to really destroy, but if we gut its insides with fire, nobody will be able to figure out how they built it.”

Virren pondered that a moment, then nodded. “Then let’s go get those books. They’ll be good kindling.”

“You do that, I’m going to shadow walk out and get some oil and some coal. I want a *big* fire, my friend, something that will burn hot and burn for a while.”

“Then bring lots of coal.”

“I will. Collect up your souvenirs, my friend, and we’ll get this done as soon as I get back.”

Chapter 23

It was raining again when he got Virren back to Atan, and shadow walked back to where the camp had been. They had packed up and moved on, as he expected that they would, but it wouldn't be that hard for him to find them. They would be moving north, making sure that there was nothing exceedingly nasty in the path of Danvers' troops. He stood in the rain by the drowned ashes of the campfire, pondering a moment in silence, pondering what was to come. And not just his discovery, but the weighty thought of the Great Ancients. He had stood in the last bastion of their very civilizations, read their papers, walked along halls that had not known the footsteps of a man in a thousand years. Though it was a place of great evil, still, it was his past, it had shaped the present, and as much as he could object to what they had done, he could relate in that now he had to do something that he didn't want to do. But unlike them, he fully understood and appreciated what was coming. His spirit had sent him there to learn more than one truth. One had been about the very nature of magic and alchemy itself, but the other...the other....

Sometimes, there are no happy endings.

So be it. He had accepted that lot when he took up the burden of Shaman, had decided to walk with his totem rather than accept death when she gave him that choice. For him, there would be no happy ending. But so long as he made the ending happy for others, then he would be content.

The age of slavery was going to come to an end...and with it would come the death of an entire civilization. What was born from the ashes would be a better place, shaped by kindness, but he would take no pleasure or joy in the destruction to come. It would be with a heavy heart and a reluctant hand that he cut away the last strings holding Noraam together and plunged all Noraavi civilization into chaos. All men would curse his name

as long as the memory of him remained in history. Only when he passed into myth would he finally find reprieve, find rest, and he would be long gone by then.

Long gone, and probably still held in thrall by his spirit.

And it was about to begin. DeVaur had overrun what futile resistance the Loreguard had put in his way, and he was on his way to Avannar. The northern kingdoms had been in place for a while, amusing themselves by sieging New Avannar, splitting it from Old Avannar—not that there was anyone really left in Old Avannar, since the Loreguard had correctly realized that they couldn't hold the entire city and had abandoned the southern half. Danna was mustering the Arcans in preparation for the march east, and the Arcans spread through the Smoke Mountains were digging in and would be ready when the time came. Atan wouldn't be the only mountain village the human armies attacked, but it would be the first, and the most heavily defended by the Arcans. Atan was one of the major strategic assets of the coming war, for it was at the terminus of a path through the mountains that anything but a wagon could use. The Cuman Pass and Two River were the other major strategic locations that the Arcans had to defend, for they were the two widest passes through the mountains, one an overland pass and the other a river valley that cut through the mountains.

In four days, Avannar would fall. In four days, the Loremasters would be removed as a continental force. In four days, the Loreguard would be shattered and rendered little more than a series of isolated garrisons scattered through the twelve kingdoms. In four days, the entire continent of Noraam would be at war. In four days, the era of slavery would begin to wane like the setting sun.

In four days, change would come to Noraam.

And he hated it, even as he hurtled towards it.

It took him only a few minutes to find the others, dropping from a shadow gateway over Vasha and literally dropping down into the saddle,

startling his Equar quite a bit. She brayed in surprise and reared, which made him laugh and clutch onto the saddle. “Woah there, girl, it’s just me!” he told her.

“I was starting to worry, Shaman,” Ebony told him from beside Vasha. “Did your tasks go well?”

“Well enough,” he replied. “Where are we?”

“On the way to the Atan Road,” Clover answered. “We’re about a day from reaching it. We’ll be climbing up and over into the Green Valley in just an hour or so.”

“The rain?”

“It stopped overnight, enough for the streams to recede somewhat. I’m sure it’s still quite mucky for the army, though.”

“Where were you off to all night, brother?” Dancer asked.

“I was learning about the past, as my spirit bade me,” he replied.

“And what did you learn?”

“How to make sure we don’t repeat their mistakes,” he replied in a grim voice. “I found the place where they kept *the machine*,” he told them.

They gasped. “What was there?” Dancer asked.

“They evacuated the place at the end, so there was little left. I found the machine itself and some scraps they forgot in their hurry to leave. The only thing I found that was of any use was one of their guns. Just one.”

“Did you give it to Haven?” Clover asked.

He shook his head. “Blackclaw is cleaning it for me, and the Shaman with the army are studying it to see if they can duplicate its parts. It still works,” he told them. “We tested it. The bullets in it were so degraded that what came out all but fell to the ground when we tried it, but it *did* work. Blackclaw’s positive he can replace the powder they used with the

smokeless powder the Britons use in their rifles. He's pressing some new bullets for it, and he'll test it as soon as they put the gun back together."

"Why not send it to Haven?"

"Because if I do that, I'll never get it back," he said honestly. "They can make copies, but the original is *mine*. I'm going to need it."

"I would almost wish that you'd take me there, Kyven," Dancer mused. "I've always wondered what's behind that huge door."

"Pain, sister," he replied, shivering. "The whole place is like a scream of horror trapped inside, echoing down the corridors for all eternity. It made my skin crawl to be in there. I couldn't move the machine, it was way too big, but I did destroy it so if anyone ever gets past that door, they can't figure out how it was built."

"What else was there, brother?" Clover asked. "There had to be more."

"Not much," he replied, then spent the time they went up the ridge separating the Green Valley and down into it telling them about what they found, down into some of the most fertile farmland in the territories, a land of small villages and isolated farmsteads scattered up and down the valley floor. If not for the proximity of the Smoke Mountains and the wild animals, monsters, and Arcans that lived in them, there would be many more people down in that green expanse. "Everything was brittle, dried out due to the air, so what little we found that didn't fall apart was preserved like they'd left the place the day before."

"And that machine that kept it that way?"

"It burned out when I touched it. It was never designed to be touched by a Shaman, I suppose," he grunted. "It wasn't a pleasant experience. It didn't die quietly." He looked up into the sky. "But that wasn't what I was there to learn. She may have sent me there to learn about the past, but what I learned was something about myself. About *everything*."

“Now we get down to the meat of things,” Dancer said eagerly. “And what wisdom did you take from that place?”

“I came to understand myself, to understand who I am and what I have to do. I came to understand the power of illusion in a way I never have before. It’s something she’s been trying to make me see for a long time, but I never *understood*, not until last night. I’d come close many times, but had never made the connection. Last night, I did. I understand now.”

“And what did you understand?”

“That illusions are nothing but figments of my imagination,” he said with a slight smile, looking at the vixen out of the corner of his eye.

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” he said with a slight edge in his voice that Clover picked up immediately, which made her laugh. His eyes ignited from within with the emerald radiance of his power, his spirit sight, and he shrugged his shoulders. “Hold still.”

Dancer gave him a sideways look. “What?” she asked, then he heard her squeal. “Aiiieeeyyyaaahh!” she cried, putting both hands on her head after Kyven had leaned way down from the saddle and rapped her on the head with a wooden mallet that was so outrageously big that it should have dragged him out of the saddle, yet he flicked it with almost negligent care, tapping her on the top of her auburn-haired head with a slight thump, flattening her ears and her hair as the mallet made contact. “That hurt!” she complained.

“Did it?” he asked, opening his hand and making the mallet vanish into thin air. “Was there ever anything there to begin with, sister?”

She gave him a curious look, both hands still on her head. Her eyes were curious and accusing at the same time, then she blinked. “I...I *felt* that!”

“You felt what you expected to feel,” Kyven said in a serene voice. “But there’s no pain now, is there?”

She let go of her head, her eyes startled, and she laughed helplessly. “That’s quite a trick, brother.”

“It’s no trick, Dancer. It’s the simplest thing in the world. It’s so simple, I just couldn’t understand it until I saw how it works. Now I feel foolish for not understanding months ago. Hell, not understanding the day my spirit taught me about illusions.” He chuckled. “Sometimes, the simplest things of all are the hardest to understand.”

“I’m not so sure about that, brother,” Dancer protested.

“Really? See that rock there, sister? Pick it up,” he told her, pointing at a rock just ahead of them, along the edge of the small, rarely-used road. Dancer bent down and scooped it up as she passed it, holding it out so he could see it. It was a fairly large rock, about the size of Virren’s fist, flattened and smoothed into an oval as if it had been at the bottom of a stream for a long time, a dull gray with several white streaks through it. “There’s the simplest thing in the world, sister. A rock. A good old plain rock. But what if I told you that the rock is only in your hand because you want it to be?”

“Of course it is, I picked it up.”

“Yes, you did. But can you hold onto it?” he asked, his glowing eyes getting even brighter.

Dancer gasped and recoiled when the rock *passed through* her hand and dropped heavily to the ground.

“Amazing!” Dancer gasped, stopping and turning around, looking at the rock. “It was like it turned to smoke in my hand!” She looked back at him as he reined in Vasha. “But it was never there to begin with, was it?” she accused. “You made it and put it there!”

“Did I?” he asked, the light fading from his eyes. “Pick up the rock, sister. As you can see, my eyes are closed to the spirits. I can’t do anything.”

“Unless you’re using an illusion to hide it,” she grumbled, reaching down and picking up the rock. She hefted it a few times, then lobbed it to Clover. She caught it and gripped it tightly, as if to test its reality, then gave Kyven a curious look.

“Interesting, brother,” Clover noted. “This rock is *real*. I know your illusions enough to know when I’m holding one, and this is no illusion. Yet you made this rock fall through Dancer’s hand,” she speculated, licking her chops as she looked at the vixen, who now looked confused.

“The rock is in your hand because you want it to be,” he said in that same serene voice, then he smiled at Clover.

“And if I didn’t want the rock in my hand?”

“Then it wouldn’t be,” he replied in an almost maddeningly calm voice.

“But, but, but *how*?” Dancer asked with sudden zealous attention. “How did you do it?”

“It’s easy, sister. I decided that the rock didn’t exist. At least for you,” he smiled. “And when I can believe it fully, completely, when I can suspend my disbelief in my own illusions, I can make illusion intrude into reality. It’s the simplest thing in the world to look at the rock and decide that it’s a real thing. It’s also the simplest thing in the world to look at the rock and decide that it’s *not*. After all, what *is* real?” he asked in that same voice. “What is truly real? And what if, just what if, sister, what is real for *you* is *not* real for someone else?”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” she protested.

“Really?” he asked. “Humans don’t have your sense of smell, sister. What you smell, they can’t. So, they can never experience the same things

you can. To them, those smells don't exist. The question you have to ask yourself, sister, is are the smells real because you can smell them, or are they *not* real because the humans can't?" He looked down at her. "But the bigger question is, which is correct? Are the smells you can smell real because you can, or are they not real because others can't?"

"Well, the simple answer I'd jump at would be to say that they're real, but naturally that's the wrong answer," she said lightly.

"No. It's the right answer," he told her with a smile. "In fact, that question has no wrong answer, Dancer. No matter what you said, it would have been correct."

"Even if I said that trees get up out of the ground and dance every fifth harvest moon on a year ending in zero?" she asked teasingly.

"Even that was the correct answer," he told her, patting Vasha. "And that's the simplest thing of all, sister. What if, just what if, no matter what answer you give to a question, your answer is always right?"

Dancer furrowed her brow, then she laughed ruefully. "Alright, now you've confused me, brother."

"When you can answer that question, sister, then you'll understand," he told her.

"They're both right because of their point of view," Ebony blurted from ahead, then she looked back at them with a rueful expression. "If you look at it through both sets of eyes."

Kyven snapped his fingers and pointed at the large wolf. "*Exactly*," he told her, which made her smile sheepishly. "What you see, what you feel, it isn't the same as everyone else, sister, even if you and Clover sat and watched the same sunset. Both of you would see different colors, notice different things, and though you're looking at the same thing, that same thing becomes two different things, one for each of you. Those points of view shape the way you perceive the world, and in return, it defines the fundamental basis of *your* reality. But *your* reality isn't the same as Clover's

reality, because she sees different things, understands them differently. But neither of you are wrong about what you see or hear or smell. To you, what you experience exists just as surely as what Clover experiences exists to *her*. Neither of you are wrong. Both of you are right. Reality is as much your own point of view as it is anything else, sister, but it doesn't make reality any less real for either of you, even if you don't see it exactly the same way."

"Okay, you've just baked my brain, brother," Dancer laughed ruefully.

"It's the simplest thing in the world," he chuckled.

"And when you make an illusion real, you bring *your* reality into *ours*," Clover reasoned.

"Something like that," Kyven nodded. "As long as I believe in my own reality and have enough willpower to overcome *your* concept of reality, I can make an illusion as real to you as the very rock you hold, sister."

"If the rock is real," Clover laughed, dropping it on the ground. Dancer, however, quickly rushed over and scooped it up, then slid it into her shoulder satchel.

"The rock is as real as you want it to be, sister," he said seriously, looking her in the eyes. "It's as real as you make it."

"Well, I'm keeping it," Dancer declared, patting her satchel. "We'll see just how real the rock is, brother."

"It'll be a good way for you to keep out of trouble, sister," he smiled. "If you're brooding over that rock, you won't be getting bored and wandering off and into mischief."

She laughed. "I see Clover told you *those* stories," she retorted.

"In every gloriously lurid detail."

Dancer smacked Clover on the shoulder, which made the coyote chuckle.

Kyven let them stew over his lesson most of the morning, feeling the sleepless night catch up with him enough to doze in the saddle, letting Vasha follow Ebony as she tended to do when Kyven wasn't all that attentive. They encountered no scouts until midafternoon, when a quartet of uniformed men galloped by on the way south while they hid in a small clearing just off the road. Kyven had sat down against a tree at the edge of the tiny clearing, which looked to have once held a cabin judging from the tumble of stones in the middle, the remnants of a chimney. He nodded off while they waited for the scouts to get far enough south not to turn around and chase them down, but started when Danvers' voice came through the talker. "Clover," he called.

"We're here, General," she replied, sitting on the log facing him. She'd been staring at him while he was asleep. "What is it?"

"Just checking in. How are the road conditions?"

"Better, it didn't rain as much in the Green Valley as it did south," she replied. "And we've only seen one patrol since reaching the valley. It just passed us moments ago, we're waiting for them to get further away before we move."

"Good. I'm stepping up the army. I want you to head directly for the Atan road and join the main army. It started marching at dawn. Danna's moving out with about a third of her army, only those troops that have muskets or rifles."

"Well, that's wise," Clover mused. "She can't let them see that not every Arcan in the army has a firearm."

"The rest are going to dig in at Atan and get ready for the attack we all know is coming," Danvers grunted. "So move as quickly as you can, my friend, and report back anything important."

"We will, General." Clover looked over at him. "Brother, I think you should go to Atan and get some sleep. You've been struggling to stay awake most of the day."

“I had a long night,” he agreed. “I guess I can return to the shop and sleep in my old bed, maybe catch up with Timble a little.”

“That’s best. We’ll be just fine, my brother, no need to worry about us.”

After a long sleep in his old bed, Kyven woke up past midnight. There was a great deal to do, and there wasn’t much time. He stretched his arms and then slid his legs out of bed, opening his eyes to the spirits to look around. Timble was in Holm’s old apartment, which was only proper since he was the master of the shop, sleeping. The senior apprentices were in their rooms, and the first years were up in the attic, all asleep. The others had tried to get him to stay up late and tell stories and reminisce, but he’d been too tired, and he didn’t have the luxury of sleeping right now.

He got dressed quickly and used his magic to clean himself and his clothes, expelling all dirt and oil and sweat and leaving him and his clothes dry and fresh and clean, then he wasted no time getting down to business. He’d intended to go to Avannar tonight and start sowing the seeds of dissent, but that would have to wait for another day. His first task sent him back to the army, stepping out of the shadows in front of rows of small tents. Sentries saw him and saluted as he stalked through the camp, moving with purpose past the officers’ tents and to the tents of the Shaman. He found Blackclaw’s tent and opened it, and the middle-aged black wolf Arcan started from his slumber as Kyven channeled light into the small tent. “Brother,” he said sleepily.

“Did you finish?” he asked immediately.

Blackclaw grinned. “Of course I did,” he replied, getting to his knees and opening a small chest. He removed the ivory-handled pistol, wrapped in soft leather, then offered it to Kyven. “Cleaned and working perfectly,” he proclaimed. “I had to replace some of the springs in its action, they were just too old to be dependable. And here’s the duplicate,” he added, taking a second pistol out of the box. “It works too, we tested it.”

“Did you make the parts for it?”

“In this box,” he replied, taking a small rosewood box out of his footlocker. “There’s a second duplicate in here, fully assembled and with instructions on how to take it apart to duplicate it. Take this to Haven and give it to our gunsmiths.”

“Blackclaw, brother, I could kiss you,” Kyven said as he took the second pistol. “Thank the spirits a Shaman with experience with guns came along.”

“I duplicated musket parts too many times not to get curious,” he replied with a toothy smile. “This gun isn’t as fancy as those two. I took off the design etchings and replaced the fancy grips with something more utilitarian. I pressed bullets for it and made extra clips. I had Patience make up a weapons belt and holsters for you,” he added, taking those out of the box. It was a wide belt with a pistol holster on either side and notches for other holsters, such as for a shockrod or sword, and long slotted pouches along the back, each one designed to hold one clip. “There are ten clips and each one is fully loaded with bullets.”

“That’s a lot of rounds.”

“As fast as the gun shoots them, they won’t last forever,” Blackclaw warned. “It fires literally as fast as you can pull the trigger, brother. No cocking, no loading, just pull the trigger. You can empty the clip in a matter of seconds.”

“Fuck,” Kyven grunted in surprise, feeling the weight of the pistol. “Does it still work the same?”

“Exactly the same. You remember how to load and cock it?”

Kyven nodded as he put on the belt, then loaded a clip into each pistol, cocked them and put on the safeties so he could fire them quickly, then put a gun in each holster and used the clever snaps Patience had put on them to secure the flaps. “Thanks for getting it done so quickly, brother,” Kyven said in gratitude.

“You can thank me by getting that box to Haven as fast as you can,” he answered.

“It’ll be done in the morning when the council wakes up,” he replied, taking off his pack and putting the box in it, then shouldering it again. “I’ll take it straight to them and let them handle getting the gun in production.”

“I hope they do it quickly. I’ve got the parts here to duplicate more, but only four of us can duplicate things, and I already have a waiting list for them that starts with Danvers and goes right down the list by rank,” he laughed.

“Give them to the Shaman first,” Kyven said immediately. “A weapon like this suits us *perfectly*. Small, easy to use, easy to maintain, and with a lot of firepower that *doesn’t* require magic.”

“Of course,” he said with a chuckle, reaching into his clothes by his cot and pulling out another pistol, this one made of black steel and with wolf designs etched into the barrel. “This one is *mine*,” he grinned.

“Good. Get one for every one of our brothers and sisters, my brother, *then* start handing them out to the army officers.”

“It will be done, brother.”

That done, his next task sent him many long steps into the shadow world, hidden behind his mask of shadowy illusion from the *things* lurking within, across the Angry Sea and all the way to Eusica. He stepped out of the shadows and into an alleyway on a foggy morning in one of the largest cities in Briton, a truly ancient city that was rumored to have existed for over three thousand years. The city certainly *looked* that old. The cobblestones of the alley were worn and smooth, narrow with gray-stoned buildings packed close together. Where it was past midnight back home, it was early morning in Briton, the thick fog illuminated by the risen sun as its heat tried to burn away the clinging mist. Kyven stepped out onto a well-traveled street, where Britons filed back and forth both on foot and on conveyances, be them buggies, carriages, or horseback, Britoners going

about their daily routines in this city, which was three times as large as Avannar.

Britoners spoke a very different dialect of Noravi, so Kyven had little trouble getting directions from an innkeeper, but he had to stop and think about what he was hearing to understand it. They had a strange accent and many of the words they used had different meanings, he realized quickly, but the basic foundation of their language was the same as Noravi. They called it English over here, however. After getting the directions he needed, he found what he was looking for, an armorer's shop. Britons and Eusicans in general had much more advanced guns than they did on Noraam, but the trade-off for that was that they had virtually no alchemy here. Alchemical devices in Eusica were very rare and dreadfully expensive because the Loremasters actively suppressed trading crystals to Eusica for their goods starting about ten years ago...probably about when they started to understand that crystals weren't an infinite resource. In that time, all the crystals in the devices in Briton had faded, but even before that, crystals had been *extremely* expensive due to their rarity. Only the truly rich had alchemical devices in Briton, those who could afford something that would cost the average person an entire year's wages for what would amount to a toy or luxury. The Britons didn't *need* alchemy the way they did in Noraam, and that was mainly the collars that kept the Arcans enslaved.

Kyven opened the door of the shop and found himself staring at an absolute arsenal. Pistols and long-barreled guns hung on racks behind the counter in front of him, guns of every shape and size, from tiny little things that would fit in a pocket to a monstrosity with a barrel so wide that Kyven could put his hand inside it. Two clerks were behind the counter helping two different customers, one of them old and with thick chop moustaches, the other about eighteen or so from the looks of him with short-cropped fire red hair and freckles on his face. The two men gave Kyven a strange look, mainly due to his traveling clothes, and one put his hand under the counter as if he was expecting trouble. "Here now, and what can I do for ye, stranger?" the older man asked as Kyven came up to the counter.

"Ye don't look like a Britoner," the young one said.

“I’m not,” Kyven replied calmly. “I asked around, and I was told by several that this shop employs the best gunsmiths in all of Briton.”

Both of them preened a little bit. “Aye, aye, we do have a certain reputation,” the younger one said, smiling. “And what do ye be needin’ our reputation for?”

“I’m looking for a cutting edge weapon, and this may be the place to find it,” he said. “I’m looking for a rifle that doesn’t need to be cocked and fired with every shot.” He unshouldered his Briton rifle and put it on the counter. “I’ve used this rifle for a while, but recently I came across a handgun that automatically reloads itself with every shot. The workings of the pistol aren’t that complicated, so I figure that *someone* here in Briton has a similar design, since your guns are a good century ahead of ours.”

“Ye be a Noraavi?” the older man asked in suspicion.

“I am,” he replied bluntly.

“We do not buy or sell with slaveholders,” the man said stiffly. “Ye can kindly leave my shop.”

“You’re going to sell to *me*, honored grandfather,” Kyven said with steady eyes. He unslung his pack, opened, it, then set an ingot of pure gold on the counter, so heavy that it made a *thunk* when Kyven put it down.

The two customers gasped and looked at him, and the two shopkeepers gave him a startled look. “I’m here to find the most technologically advanced and *dependable* rifle I can get my hands on. Something a soldier needs, good shopkeeper. Something very tough and durable, resistant to extended exposure to the weather, something easy to use, easy to clean, and easy to maintain, but something that also works like this does,” he said, unholstering one of his pistols. He unloaded the round from the chamber, unlocked the clip and pulled it out, then put both pistol and clip on the counter, letting them see the bullets loaded into the clip. “I need a rifle fitting for a soldier that uses *this* technology. Now, do you have such a rifle?”

The older man gawked at the gold ingot, but the younger one was staring at the pistol. “May I?” he asked, motioning at the pistol.

“Go ahead.”

He picked up the blocky weapon and hefted it, then brought it up and looked down its sights. “Rugged,” he noted, then he looked at its profile. “Very rugged. A little heavier than it needs to be, but I bet you could drive a wagon over it and it’ll still work. Mechanical slide action, most likely driving a spring-loaded action for self-loading. The pistol uses its own recoil to help chamber the next round.”

“If you know how it works, then I was sent to the right shop,” Kyven said simply.

“Gents, if ye’d leave us with this young man for a wee bit,” the older man said to the two customers. Clearly, the heavy bar of gold Kyven set on the counter was enough for them to ignore Kyven’s nation of birth. The older man went through the door in the back of the shop as the younger man puzzled out how to break down the pistol, taking off its sliding top, then removing some of its action, the way Kyven had learned how to do it to clean the weapon when he gave it over to Blackclaw. Much as Blackclaw had worked out the gun’s workings, this young man had done the same in a much shorter amount of time. The young man put the pieces on the counter, studied them, then he put them all back together, cocked the weapon without a round in it, then pulled the trigger. The action worked perfectly. “Where did ye find this, friend? This is something I’ve never seen before, and I’ve seen a whole lot of guns in my short life.”

“Believe it or not, that gun you’re holding is over a thousand years old,” Kyven said bluntly. “It was found in a forgotten vault.”

“A thousand years old, ye say?” he breathed. “It looks like it was made just last week!”

“It was preserved in a solid block of hardened grease that protected it from the air,” Kyven answered. “After we replaced the springs and a few

other parts that had worn out over the years, it works.”

“*Begaura*,” the young man breathed. “This must be from the Ending War!”

“It is,” Kyven replied.

The older man came back out with a blocky-looking rifle, about the same size as the smaller Briton rifles with which they’d been outfitting the Arcans. “This is something we’ve been trying to sell to the Royal Army,” the old man said. “It’s what ye’re lookin’ for, youngster. It fires six rounds without having to work a lever or bolt. Six shots, then you reload. Its action isn’t very complicated, it’s basically just a step up from your lever-action rifle. It uses springs to load the next round in the stack instead of you pulling the lever.” The old man offered it to him, and Kyven immediately felt that it was *solid*. It was fairly heavy, heavier than it looked, which was probably why Briton’s Royal Army wasn’t very interested in it. A soldier’s weapon couldn’t be too heavy. “It fires six thirty-two *beven* cartridges, and like most cartridges, they can be re-used if they’re not damaged. The gun was built to be all but unbreakable. Ye can drop it off a three story building onto the cobblestones, then pick it up and fire it. It can even fire when wet,” he said proudly.

“But it’s a bit heavy, which is why they haven’t bought them yet,” Kyven noted, which made the older man sigh and nod.

“Aye, we can’t figure out how to make it any lighter,” he admitted. “But the action in this rifle is very simple. It’s easy to clean, and it can take a ferocious pounding and still shoot straight and true.”

“What kind of range does it have?”

“I don’t think ye know our measures, but it’s accurate out to about three hundred steps,” he replied.

“Show me the rounds.”

The old man pulled a box of nasty-looking bullets from under the counter. They ended in points, not rounded like the cartridges of his pistol, and the bullets were longer than he expected...hauntingly similar to the bullets he'd seen in the Great Ancient base. The rounds looked slightly narrower than the rounds of his pistol, which according to the ancient measurement on the gun, was .45 calibre...whatever a calibre was. Blackclaw hadn't been very specific. "It uses these. Sixty-two *genn* rounds at thirty-two *beven*. These rounds can punch through a stone wall inside fifty steps."

Kyven picked up one of the bullets, and saw that it *looked* deadly.

The weight...the Shaman could probably do something about that. If the gun was as durable as the men claimed, then it was what he wanted. "Do you have a place where I can fire this rifle?"

"Aye, but only if I get to fire that pistol," the younger man said immediately.

"Deal."

They took him into a huge cellar that was obviously intended to be a firing range, an earthen bank behind a series of wooden targets. They showed him how to load the rifle, which was done one round at a time through a sliding hatch in the top, pushing each round down and locking it in, then the next on top of it, and so on until five were in the storage area of the weapon and the sixth was loaded directly into the firing chamber. When the slide was closed, the weapon was ready to fire, it required no cocking. Its action was actually much less advanced than his pistol, but it would fire without needing any cocking or pulling a bolt or lever before reloading, it reloaded faster than a musket, and it had the same range and killing power as his dependable Briton rifle. Kyven found that while it was fairly heavy compared to the two versions of Briton rifles they were using, it had very good sights, and it shot dead straight. The weapon truly did fire as fast as he could pull the trigger, the cartridges ejecting from the top right side of the rifle, and when he fired the sixth shot, it made an audible *pank* sound.

“That’s the spring plate hitting the stop plate, that sound tells ye the gun’s empty,” the older man told him.

“And it tells anyone else familiar with the gun that it’s empty,” he noted.

“Aye,” the older man admitted.

Kyven nodded and put the rifle on the table in front of them, then handed the pistol to the younger man. “Just pull back the top slide to load the round and cock it, then pull the trigger. Oh, the safety’s on, right there,” he pointed.

The young man emptied the clip down the range, and both men looked *extremely* impressed, because the gun fired quickly, smoothly, and was very accurate given how tightly the holes in the target were bunched together.

Kyven loaded and fired the rifle several times, and after he was done, he nodded and set it on the table. “I’ll take it,” he declared. He put not just the bar of gold he’d set on the counter upstairs on the table, but two more ingots just as big as the first. There was more gold on that table than the shop earned in a year.

“*Begaura*, that much?”

“That’s for the gun and a box of bullets,” he replied. “Oh, and you showing me how to break it down and clean it.”

“Not even *this* rifle is worth that much,” the younger man admitted.

“Trust me, it’s worth every speck of gold,” Kyven replied easily.

The gunsmiths were right in how simple the gun was. It wasn’t complex at all, just a series of springs, bolts, and mounting plates inside that chambered the rounds as it was fired, and that made it *very* easy to take apart and clean. It also made it much harder to break, for the simpler it was, the fewer parts it had that could break down. Kyven was fairly confident that the gun *was* very durable, and the older man proved it by not just

dropping it, but throwing it on the ground, then he picked it up, loaded it, and it fired without issue.

“Son, I know I shouldn’t sell it to ye, but simple truth is, we spent too much money inventing it not to sell it to *someone*,” the older man admitted. “Don’t worry, honored grandfather, you’re not selling it to slaveholders,” Kyven replied. “I represent the *Arcans*, good Britoners. I’m taking this rifle back to *them*, so they can fight for their freedom.”

“Truly?”

“Have you heard the rumors of what’s going on in Noraam?”

They nodded. “Rumor says that civil war has broken out.”

“It’s more than that. The kings of Noraam have declared war on the Loremasters, but also in the middle of it are the free Arcans. They’ve lived far to the west of Noraam for hundreds of years, staying hidden, and now that the kingdoms are in turmoil, they’ve invaded from the west to free their Arcan brothers and sisters from slavery. They’re in desperate need of arms, so they sent me to Eusica to find this,” Kyven said, hefting the rifle. “A well built rifle that’s easy to use, can handle being banged around out in the wilderness, and outstrips the range of Noravi muskets by a good two hundred steps, but has a lot of stopping power. These rifles will be in the hands of Arcan soldiers, fighting to free their own from the slavers’ collars.”

“Ye could have used the rifle ye have already,” the younger noted. “They’re the newest innovation to make it into the gun shops. Still frightfully expensive, but at least they’re in production. They’re not prototypes like this one. We hand-built that rifle in this very shop, after quite a few failures as we worked the bugs out of the design.”

“I could, but after I found those pistols, I realized how much of an advantage it is to *not* have to jack a lever or slide a bolt between shots. I want to take back a rifle that shoots every time you pull the trigger. And this

one does *exactly* that,” he said, patting the wooden stock. “So, let’s finish our business, good Britoners,” he declared. “I need a box of bullets.”

Half an hour later, Kyven walked out of the shop with a long wooden box slung on his shoulder, holding his new MacGefferson and Son’s prototype semi-automatic six shot repeating rifle, a box of bullets, and one of the revolvers that Danvers had described thrown in just because Kyven was curious about them, a five shot cylinder model that used the same cartridge as the rifles. And he had the feeling that in two years, he would come back and find something *very* similar to his Colt 1911 sitting on a stand in their shop. They’d seen how his gun worked, and the younger one had taken it apart and seen the pieces. Kyven had no doubt that he’d run right back into their workshop the instant Kyven walked out the door, feverish to draw what he’d seen so they could try to make one of their own.

It was a fair trade, as far as he was concerned. He had their rifle, which they’d mass produce via the Shaman, and in return, the shop got to see something they’d never seen before. And if they could manage to duplicate it, more power to them.

Kyven had to be careful shadow walking back to Noraam because of that box. He couldn’t conceal the box like he could his clothes, it was far too big, so that was a real object moving through the shadow world, and that attracted the *things*. Kyven managed to get back to the army without any encounters, however, stepping out of the shadows directly in front of Blackclaw’s tent. He woke the poor wolf up a second time, dropping the box on the ground by his cot. “Brother, what’s wrong?” he asked blearily. “Is there something wrong with the gun?”

He shook his head, kneeling down and opening the case. He withdrew the MacGefferson rifle. “I want you to duplicate this,” he announced. “I just bought this from a gun shop in Briton. It fires six shots without having to cock the rifle every time. It’s not half as advanced as the pistol is, but it works.”

Blackclaw got out of his cot and took the rifle from Kyven. "It's pretty heavy," he noted.

"I know. It doesn't hold as many rounds as the rifles we already have, but it shoots faster and it's more rugged. Think you can duplicate it?"

"Surely I can," he replied. "But truth be told, brother, we're better off with the bolt-action short rifles."

"Right now we are, but you're looking at the short road, brother," Kyven told him. "When you get me the copy, I'm going to drop it and the pistol in front of the council and tell them to find a gunsmith that can take them both and figure out a way to import the clip and automatic reloading technology of the pistol into the *rifle*," he replied. "A rifle version of the pistol, with them having two different examples to work from to figure out something that's both rugged and dependable. Imagine a rifle that used clips of bullets and was easy to shoot and reload," he said simply. "We already have a big advantage thanks to our lever-action and bolt-action Briton rifles, even if we don't have that many of them. Many of our soldiers are using farm tools," he grunted, which made Blackclaw nod grimly. "If we had something like a rifle version of these pistols, it would give our Arcans an *overwhelming* advantage in battle, and that's before we even take the Shaman into account."

Blackclaw's eyes widened, then he laughed brightly. "That's *devious*, my brother! Yes, that's an amazing idea!"

"And it only cost me three bars of gold," he replied lightly. "It's going to take them a year or two to figure out how to do it, after we've freed our brothers and sisters and about when the humans stop warring with each other. By then, they'll probably all join together and come over the mountains looking for revenge, and when that happens, we have to have every advantage we can get."

"And until then, we make as many of the smaller rifles and pistols as we can," Blackclaw agreed. "They meld perfectly with our alchemical

weapons and the Shaman, giving us an advantage in ranged combat and an overwhelming advantage in close quarters.”

“This isn’t about just this war, brother, it’s about the survival of Haven. This won’t bear fruit for years, but when it does, it will be there for us.”

“You are truly a Shaman, brother, Blackclaw said with an approving nod. “You have learned true wisdom.”

“Thank you, brother,” Kyven said. “I’ll leave this with you. Send me a message when you have a duplicate I can take to Haven. Oh, and give this to Wilson, tell him it’s a gift from me,” he added, tossing the revolver to Blackclaw. “It uses the exact same cartridges as the rifles.”

“I’ll get it to him,” he nodded.

Kyven, the Shaman, and his nannies joined the main host of the army late the next afternoon. It was quite a sight to see, thousands and thousands of Arcans walking along on two feet rather than on all fours, some dressed in uniforms and some wearing whatever—or nothing, packs and weapons slung on their backs as they moved at a very leisurely pace for Arcans, basically just poking along so they reached Avannar at the proper time. They were challenged by a scout as they approached, but the fact that it was a man riding an Equar and with two Shaman with him ensured his safety. They were led to the front of the army, where Danna and her officers rode at the lead of several wagons. It was far too important to keep moving for them to stop to greet, so Kyven surprised Danna and made her laugh by hauling her up off her horse and pulling her into the saddle. He gave her a big kiss on the side of her muzzle, and she leaned against him. “Hello there, Kyven,” she said gently, almost cooingly.

“Well, here we are,” he said lightly, patting her on the rump. “Danvers is just a day or so behind us.”

“I know, he’s been keeping us up to date. Any trouble?”

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” he replied. “How goes the march?”

“We had plenty of time to organize, so it’s going well,” she answered. “Are we on time?”

“Right where you should be,” he nodded. “You’ll take the field about four hours after DeVaur arrives. Then the fun starts,” he grunted.

“It’s good to see you again, Clover,” Danna said, looking over at her. “And who’s with you?”

“You’ve heard me talk about my nannies, love,” he chuckled. “That’s Ebony, the worst of them all. The tall, handsome coyote is Striker, and the cat is Fastpaw. They’re good friends, even if they take themselves just a *little* too seriously,” he grinned at them.

“We do what we must do, Shaman, because you will not do for yourself,” Ebony replied with a slight smile.

“And this is my sister Shaman, Dancer,” he noted, motioning at the red fox.

“I remember you,” Danna said. “We talked several times back in Haven.”

“It’s good to see you again, Danna,” Dancer replied as she climbed up onto Danna’s now unmounted horse. He’d noticed that Dancer had a propensity for riding rather than walking. “Congratulations on your blessing.”

Danna put a reflexive paw on her stomach. “How did you know?” she gasped.

“I’m a Shaman, my friend. We have our ways,” she winked.

“You’re *pregnant*?” Ebony asked.

Danna nodded, almost ruefully. “It turns out that that damned fox was smarter than we were,” she replied. “I’m a little angry, but what’s done is done.”

“That’s why, from now on, you stay as you are,” Kyven told her seriously. “I have absolutely no idea how you changing back and forth will affect the babies. You’ll be wearing the fur until you give birth, love.”

“Then I give them away,” she grunted.

“Only if you want to,” he replied with a shrug. “They’re *our* children, Danna. Yes, they’re Arcan, but that doesn’t mean that I don’t already love them. As much as I love you,” he replied, looking her in the eyes. “Them being Arcan *does not matter* to me.”

“You, I believe, Kyv,” she said, putting a clawed hand on the side of his face gently.

“What’s in here is far more beautiful than what’s outside,” he replied, putting his hand on her upper chest.

“Now that we have all the cloying sentimentality out of the way,” Danna said with an impish grin, which made Kyven laugh, “Tell me what you’ve been up to.”

“Actually, I have something for you,” he answered. “I was supposed to take it directly to Haven, but I want you to have one before I give it up.”

“What?”

He turned to one of the other Arcans. “Brother Shaman, can you track down the Shaman best at duplicating objects?”

“Well, you’re looking at one of them, brother,” the burly bull Shaman answered, his left horn broken. “But I’ll go get them.”

“What did you bring?” Danna asked.

Kyven pulled out one of his pistols. “This,” he replied. “It’s one of the guns from the Great Ancient Civilization,” he told her, which made quite a few who heard him gasp. “It’s an order of magnitude better than anything we have. Blackclaw made two duplicates. The original and one of the duplicates are mine, and the other is so we can make more of them. I’m

supposed to get it to Haven as fast as possible, but I want the Shaman here to have a duplicate of it to use to make them *here*. We'll have far more immediate use for them than they will in Haven."

"Amazing, I've never seen anything like it!" Danna breathed, taking the pistol with both hands as Kyven held her steady on Vasha's back. "How does it work?"

"It uses cartridge bullets just like the Briton rifles, and automatically loads the next bullet every time you fire it, and it holds nine bullets in a removable clip," he answered. "You can shoot all nine as fast as you can pull the trigger. I want you to have two of them, love. You need them."

"Wow, a relic of the Great Ancients," she whispered, sliding her fingertips along the etched barrel. "How did it last so long?"

"It was preserved by magic," he answered. "There was an alchemical machine where I found it that was *still* running, and it preserved it."

"A thousand years? How is that possible?" one of the other Shaman asked, a willowy otter.

"I'll explain it later. Anyway, as soon as we stop, I want the Shaman to create three duplicates. One stays here, the other two are yours. I want you carrying two of these by tomorrow morning, and the Shaman with the parts they need to make as many as they can ever time we stop. I'll take it on to Haven afterwards and they can bend every Shaman still there to the task of mass producing these. They don't have the same range as the rifles, not even the short-barrel ones, but being able to shoot nine times could make a difference at close range, when your life depends on it. I want to see one of these on the hip of every single Arcan in this army eventually, even the workers."

"May I?" the bull asked. Danna handed it over to him when he came over to Vasha, and he inspected it with a keen eye. "I hope you know how to take it apart, brother."

“Blackclaw wrote out detailed instructions on how to disassemble it for duplication,” Kyven answered. “I’ll have a bullet press and a few barrels of the smokeless powder the Britons use in their cartridges by morning. We’ll have everything we need here to make both the gun and the bullets for it.”

“I’ll go find our best gunsmith,” the bull declared. “He’ll need to be there.”

“These could matter,” a wolf Shaman said seriously after the bull handed it to him. “Given that we can’t duplicate alchemical devices, we can produce these faster than shockrods and impact rods for short range fighting.”

“That’s the general idea, brother,” Kyven replied. “And in case the enemy is employing wide-range grounders, it won’t stop *these*.”

“The rifles will make a bigger difference when they reach us from Haven, but since not everyone in the army has a weapon, even this would be better than a pitchfork,” the bull noted. “Guns like this don’t have very good accuracy except at short range. Not due to poor craftsmanship, just due to the fact that pistols are harder to aim than rifles.”

“True enough,” Kyven agreed. “When do you expect the first shipment of rifles?”

“Ten to twelve days,” Danna replied. “They’re all but killing horses and Arcans getting them here.”

“Well, I can bring a few crates of them,” Kyven grunted. “But not enough to arm a whole lot of Arcans. I’m limited by what I can carry when I shadow walk.”

“You can bring them back after taking this on to Haven,” the wolf noted.

“Not that one. Blackclaw made a much less fancy version for mass duplication,” Kyven chuckled. “That particular gun was the possession of a very high ranking officer of the Great Ancient army. I want Danna to get

one of the handsome ones like that one, but the mass produced one won't be as fancy. Still works exactly the same, just doesn't have the ornate designs or the fancy handgrips."

"So, we make two of these and one of the utility gun?"

Kyven nodded. "Then I take the utility one to Haven for them to duplicate, and Danna gets sidearms befitting the general of the army," he said, grinning at her and patting her bottom.

"You're not making just one," Ebony declared. "We can better protect you if we have those ourselves."

"Well, I'll let you wrangle with the Shaman over that one, Ebony," Kyven told her with a sly smile.

Kyven spent the rest of the afternoon with Danna, and the others gave them their personal space. He held her in front of him, sitting sideways across his saddle as they talked about her pregnancy, about the army, about what was coming, and her personal role in the battle to come. Danna would be out there with the other three shadow walkers stealing death machines and other highly valuable weapons, so Kyven went over what he wanted to do in great detail with her, showing her illusory maps of the city and images of the devices so she'd know what they look like. But despite how important things were, they also just spent time in quiet togetherness, Danna leaning against him as they rode on Vasha at the front of the army. Kyven was carrying the woman he loved, and everything else seemed to pale in comparison to the slender, beautiful figure who had her arms wrapped around him. Human, Arcan, it didn't matter to him. What was *inside* was what made him love her, even if it was her handsome body and pretty face that had initially attracted him. After he came to know her, how she looked didn't matter half as much as *who* she was. And finally, it seemed, she was able to accept that, able to accept that Kyven didn't *care* if she was an Arcan. Even if she spent the rest of her life trapped in her Arcan body, she would always have him, and he would love her. Danna had

learned how to accept him when she couldn't accept herself. In her own way, she had learned wisdom.

Close to sunset, the army called a halt. The Arcans impressed Kyven with how quickly and efficiently they got the tents up, the sentries posted, and dinners either pulled out of stores, hunted from the surrounding forest, or set to cooking on pots over fires in the case of the trail beans. Not even Arcans liked uncooked dried beans, which they flavored with whatever edible wild plants or bones from kills they could get. Kyven helped the Shaman feed some of the monsters who were with the army, for Kyven was about the only one who could safely approach the Wolveran. The buffalo-sized badger-like monster wasn't docile even if it had agreed to help, taken to bouts of aggression when it was hungry. But Kyven's monster-friendly smell let him get close to the feared predator, a predator that would literally chase its prey to exhaustion, so single-minded and doggedly determined they were. He remembered the Wolveran that had chased them on the way to Haven, it had stayed on their trail over a full day before finally quitting, and only because they happened across *other* prey that was easier to catch. In all, Kyven had to admit, Wolverans were impressive. Big, powerful, and so stubborn that they were the most feared predator in all of Noraam.

After sitting with Danna, her officers, and the Shaman for dinner, they got to work. They called in their best gunsmiths to take apart and duplicate both pistols, the ornate ones for Danna and the more utilitarian ones that would be made for the army. It took them about two hours to get it all done, and after they oiled the moving parts and put the duplicates back together, Kyven demonstrated the guns to them by test firing the duplicates to ensure they worked. The gun was heavy but well balanced, and it fired as fast as he could pull the trigger. It had some recoil, but Kyven's Shaman honed muscles kept the barrel in line with the fallen tree he was using for a target. "The brass cartridges can be reused, just like the rifle bullets," he told them as he loaded a new clip and pulled back the slide to load and cock it.

"That's all there is to reloading?" a Shaman asked.

“That’s it, sister. Just press this little lever to release the clip, put a new one in, pull back the slide, and you’re ready to go. This pistol isn’t that hard to use, but if you’ve never used a pistol before, it takes some adjustment to get used to aiming it.”

“Interesting. I might see about getting one of these myself,” the small cat noted as she inspected the other duplicate being passed around.

“They can be handy, especially when you’re facing grounders or you’re tired,” he nodded. He fired three more shots, then lowered the weapon, stepped over, and offered it to Danna. “Just be careful getting your claw in through the trigger guard. The safety’s right here,” he added, pointing at the little safety button. “Press that when you don’t want the gun to be able to fire, it locks the trigger so you can’t pull it. Press it over on this side when you do.”

“Seems easy enough, much easier than the single shot pistols I’m used to using,” she replied, then she took the weapon up in a professional two-handed grip, threading her long claw deftly through the trigger guard, and fired a round. The gun bucked a little bit in her hand, then she brought it back down and pulled the trigger again. “It’s pretty powerful.”

“As strong as a double-loaded pistol,” Kyven agreed, then he looked back to the eight Shaman with them. “How many can you make tonight?”

“It’s got a lot of pieces, but they’re small. Maybe ten,” the bull answered.

“Then do me a favor and put two aside for me, I’m going to give them to Lightfoot and Lucky. They travel with me often, they need them for protection.”

“She’ll kiss you,” Danna chuckled.

“She’ll do a lot more than that,” he replied, which made Danna laugh helplessly.

“Three go to us,” Ebony declared adamantly. “We need them to protect the Shaman, since he won’t protect himself.”

“That leaves five to give to our most important officers,” the bull nodded. “I can make some of these on the move if I’m in a wagon, so I might be able to produce two or three a day, then more once we stop.”

“That sounds like a plan,” Kyven nodded.

After making sure all three pistols worked, Kyven got ready to go to Haven. He collected up what was going, kissed Danna goodbye, then covered both himself and as much of his cargo as he could in shadow and stepped into the shadow world. He took the ten or so steps to Haven, the *things* homing in on the boxes he couldn’t cover, and passed back into the real world in front of the Historian’s house before they were able to find him. The Historian was the one to see if he needed to talk to the council on short notice.

Things there went very well. They gawked at the pistol and rifle he’d bought from Briton, and when he explained his idea, they almost broke their necks nodding in agreement. They summoned their best gunsmiths, getting more than a few out of bed in a frosty autumn night—winter got there *damn* early in Haven—and Kyven told them what he wanted to do. They took the rifle apart, then the pistol, making drawings and giving the Shaman opportunity to duplicate the pieces, then the five gunsmiths started kicking around ideas about how to import clip technology into the rifle he’d brought them, which used a self-reloading system. It wasn’t his job to see them actually figure it out, which would probably take a year or two to finally produce a working model. This was planning for the future, for when the humans threatened Haven itself. When they finally came over the Smoke Mountains, the Arcans would need an advantage, and this would be it.

The Arcans had the Shaman, but Kyven knew that they couldn’t come to the point where they *depended* on the Shaman to survive.

About midnight, after a duplicate of the pistol was built and tested, Kyven shadow walked back to the army, picked up the two pistols, then

ranged out and found Danvers and the other army. He stepped out among the tents and tracked down Lightfoot and Lucky, who were in a tent not far from Danvers' main tent, and they certainly weren't sleeping. The growls of pleasure coming from the tent made Kyven chuckle a little, and he sat down outside and waited for them to finish. Lightfoot would smell him as soon as she got her nose out of Lucky's fur, so he was confident he wouldn't have to wait long after they were done. And true to form, the tent flap opened within seconds of the sounds of their mutual climax, and Lucky poked his head out. Lucky was still laying on top of Lightfoot, their heads to the tent flap, and Lightfoot looked up over her bone-white hair at him with a small smile.. "Shaman!" he said happily. "Did you come to get us?"

"That's up to you," he replied, taking the pistols from his satchel. "I brought you something."

"We go with you," Lightfoot declared as Lucky got off of her, and she rolled over in the small tent and crawled out. He could smell their pleasure all over them even with his human nose. Lucky came out after her, looking a little weak-kneed, which made Kyven laugh softly.

"She's wearing you out, Lucky," he noted.

"I'm not complaining," he replied with a glorious smile at her. "What are those?"

"Guns from the Great Ancient Civilization," he replied.

"Like the one you gave General Danvers?" Lucky asked in awe.

Kyven shook his head. "That was a Briton revolver. This is something entirely different."

"Show us at your camp," Lightfoot declared. "Pack up, Lucky. We're going."

"Yes, love," he replied immediately.

Kyven let them pack their tent and what gear they had as he went to talk to Danvers. The sentries let him by and let him wake the man up, but he

came awake instantly and was fully alert. “Kyven, what is it?” he asked as he sat on the edge of his cot.

“Did Blackclaw talk to you?”

“He did. He gave me the revolver you brought me, then came back later and gave me one of *those*,” he said, pointing at Kyven’s hip holster. “I must admit Kyven, I’m in love with it,” he chuckled, pointing to his belt hanging near his uniform, which had a freshly made holster in front of his shockrod sheathe.

“Then he did what I told him to do. I’ve reached the main army. You’re about half a day behind. You should join up with the Atan road after about three hours, then come up to the tail end of the column around noon.”

“What my scouts reported, but it’s good to have confirmation,” he answered with a nod.

“Lightfoot and Lucky are going back with me.”

“I’ll miss her services as a scout, but it’s her decision,” he chuckled. “Vasha behaving without Lucky there?”

“More or less,” he replied. “Well, I won’t keep you up any more than I have to, Wilson. You’ll have a long day tomorrow. I just wanted to check in.”

“I appreciate that, Kyv,” he replied. “As soon as I get to the army, keep yourself available, so we can make our plans.”

“I will,” he nodded, then he let Danvers go back to sleep.

Lightfoot had all their issued gear packed up by the time Kyven got back. Lucky was carrying the majority of it in a heavy pack, but he made no complaints at all, even took two sling rolls from Lightfoot and put them over his head. “I’ll have to walk us to the camp,” he warned as Lightfoot pulled taut a length of rope.

“We expected,” she replied in her curt manner. “Clover said you use rope.”

“Yup. Let’s get going.”

To his surprise, both of them took the experience very well. Lightfoot seemed unflappable in any situation, and Lucky came out of the shadow world without even wobbling, even carrying all that gear. The nausea the shadow world induced didn’t seem to bother him as much as it did most others. Kyven brought them to his personal camp, and Ebony and Fastpaw got out of their tents to welcome Lucky and Lightfoot back and help them set up their tent, talking in hushed tones. After they finished, Kyven presented each of them with a pistol. “I don’t have holsters for them yet,” he told them. “But these work like the revolver I gave Lightfoot a bit ago, except you don’t have to load each cylinder. I’ll show you how they work in the morning. So don’t play with them,” he warned with a smile.

Lightfoot took the heavy pistol and hefted it professionally, then looked down the sites, making sure to point the barrel away from everyone. “Heavy, but balanced,” she noted, then she carried it into their tent as Lucky turned the black steel weapon over and over in his hands gingerly.

“They’re not loaded, are they?” he asked.

“Nope. But still, don’t play with them. You might break them.”

“Alright.” Lightfoot took Lucky’s pistol and put it in the tent. “Do you need us, Shaman?”

“No, go back to sleep. Or not sleep, whatever,” he said, which made Lightfoot smile daringly. “Did they get yours to you, Ebony?” he asked.

She nodded. “We’re not carrying them because we haven’t been taught yet,” she answered.

“Alright then, I’ll see you in the morning,” he told them.

“Are you going to get any sleep?” Ebony demanded, putting her hands on her hips and giving him a challenging expression.

“Maybe, that’ll depend on how long I can keep Danna wanting more,” he replied with a jaunty swagger as he headed for Danna’s large tent, which made Ebony laugh.

“Have fun, Shaman,” she called after him, which earned her an absent wave over his shoulder.

It was an almost unnaturally cool morning.

The wall sentries manning the venerable, alchemically reinforced walls of Old Avannar were shivering a bit in the misty morning, a chill fog rolling in from the river that partially concealed the most distant of the fires of the concentrated armies of the North, arrayed out over the low hills surrounding the ancient city. The guards had no idea exactly how many were out there, but they completely surrounded the city on all three sides. To the southwest, across the river, were the smoking ruins of New Avannar, sacked and burned by the armies of Mallan and Phion, which were now infested with snipers armed with long rifles trying to pick off anything moving across the collapsed bridges over the Podac River. They weren’t the Briton rifles that some few in the Loreguard were lucky to have, they were muzzle-loading hunting rifles, much akin to a musket but with a rifled barrel and firing a different shaped bullet that made the rifles accurate even from 300 rods away. Invented and used almost exclusively in Phion, the rifles were the next step up from the muskets that were standard issue, and if not for the Briton rifles, it would have been the next weapon the Loreguard would have issued to its soldiers.

They had their long rifle, the Loreguard had alchemy. The city was bristling with both cannons and alchemical siege weaponry that would make any attempt to take the city very, very bloody. Large scale flame projectors, acid bombardiers, flitters, blackjack launchers, and several nasty-looking death machines, all protected behind repellers ready to be activated at a moment’s notice, repellers powerful enough to turn aside a cannonball. Those brutal weapons shared space at artillery emplacements

on the higher ground of Old Avannar with conventional artillery, heavy placement cannons with rifled bores for high accuracy and long range, some of them so large that it took teams of twenty mules just to move them. It was all protected behind a wall that had been alchemically treated over centuries to be virtually impregnable, so strong that cannonballs shattered when it struck them, alchemical acid just slid off of them, even a groundpounder did nothing but shake itself apart trying to break the foundation. Old Avannar had been built during the height of the Old Wars, when the kingdoms of Noraam fought among themselves, and the old kingdom of Virgan fell and became the Free Territories, the time before the Loremasters.

The time of turmoil and chaos.

The guards kept constant vigil for infiltrators trying to sneak up to the wall, moving in groups of four from emplacement to emplacement, keeping watch on the misty grasslands surrounding the wall that were once farming villages, but were now trampled over and dug out to form trenches and earthen embankments to protect artillery for the Northern armies. And all of them were out there...Mallan, Balton, Phion, Jenn, Yora, and Hamm, and coming up from the south were the Flaurens, the Georvans, the Alamari, and the Nurysians. The only kingdom that wasn't involved was Carin, but that was more due to the fact that the Carin army had been commandeered by the Loreguard before they had a chance to turn rebel, and the king had no troops to send. The Free Territories, while technically one of the twelve kingdoms, was too decentralized and scattered to have any kind of standing army, only local militias and sheriffs that wanted nothing to do with the upcoming battle. They had their own problems, mainly the *Arcans*.

Many in the Loreguard almost couldn't believe it, but the rumors had been confirmed. There was an entire *army* of Arcans that had marched in from the west, coming over the Smoke Mountains. They had captured the expeditionary force sent into the frontier to explore and map the unknown territory beyond Deep River, then moved into the Smoke Mountains and took over every single mining village from Two River all the way down to Carin. They were being led by a *Loreguard* officer, the rumors said, some

woman whom they had captured and brainwashed, or turned using dark Shaman magic, since it was well known that no Arcan could possibly lead an army like that.

Where that army came from, nobody really knew. The soldiers suspected that the Loremasters knew, but they weren't saying. Most of the rumors were that it was the Eusicans, come over and somehow getting past Noraam, raising an Arcan army, and marching in using a Loreguard officer as their commander because the officer would know Loreguard tactics. The Eusicans and their heathen religion saw owning Arcans as *slavery*, which was almost laughable to the soldiers, since slavery implied that the Arcans were more than animals. They were *property*, they were *livestock*, and one didn't keep their milk cows in slavery any more than they kept their Arcans in slavery. And the Eusicans, the cowards, were too afraid of the Loreguard to use their *own* armies, they instead used Arcans stolen from owners by the Masked, another Eusican organization most suspected, then sent into the frontier to be turned into soldiers, so the Eusicans could conquer Noraam and bring their evil religion onto the continent without getting their own hands dirty.

Every soldier on the wall stopped suddenly when a strange, sudden wind blew, tearing apart the misty clouds of fog rolling in from the river. The wind blew in from the river, drawing the mist in with it, and it started to coalesce over the exact center of Old Avannar, over the Guild of Coopers, Carpenters, and Woodworkers. The mist formed a rotating column, clearly unnatural, clearly alchemy of some kind, and then the mist started to darken, as if black liquid was poured into water, slowly mixing, spreading, tainting the mist. The mist contorted, shifted, changed, and then it took on form and color. It became a misty representation of a wide-shouldered young man with black hair and glowing green eyes, ruggedly handsome, wearing a blue jacket of some kind and a pair of rugged denim pants.

Some in the host recognized that image. It was the black fox Shaman, Kyven Steelhammer, using a human guise he could somehow assume via

alchemy or magic of some kind. That visage was on too many wanted posters for even the greenest Loreguard recruit not to know who it was.

The image started to move, standing in midair some fifty rods over the guild building, the image itself nearly fifty rods high, like some kind of ethereal giant made of smoke and darkness.

“I carry a message for the Loremasters and the Loreguard inhabiting Old Avannar,” the image intoned in a voice that was almost conversational in volume, but carried across not just the city, but minars away from the walls, within hearing of the armies camped outside. *“I am Kyven Steelhammer, whom many of you know as the black fox Shaman. While that was my disguise while I moved through Avannar, the truth is, I am a human. I am a human Shaman, the first of my kind. And as a human Shaman, it falls upon me to deliver this warning to my brethren.*

“Avannar is doomed. As most of you can plainly see, you are vastly outnumbered by the collective armies of the twelve kingdoms. The fault for this is clearly on the Loremasters, for they broke the conditions of the alliance and tried to take over all of Noraam as a ruling body, supplanting the kings. The kings have every right to enter in war against those who would take their crowns. You, the Loreguard, are fighting for the wrong side,” the image declared, looking down at the walls almost as if it could see them. *“The Loremasters violated the treaties that formed the alliance, but I felt it was important for you, the common soldier, to understand why things have come to this.*

“Simply put, the crystals are running out,” the image said grimly. *“The mana crystals that power most of the devices which we depend on are almost gone. They aren’t an infinite resource, and centuries of mining them from the earth has dwindled what’s left down to the point where they won’t last ten more years. Ask any crystal merchant or miner, they’ll confirm that over the last twenty years, the supply of crystals flowing in from the mines has dwindled steadily. In ten more years, that supply will drop to a bare trickle, in no way keeping up with the demand for crystals in new alchemical devices or old ones whose crystals have expended. The*

Loremasters have known this for decades, and it was their plan to use the crystal shortage to take over all of Noraam. Many of you soldiers had orders prior to this to march into the mining villages in the Smoke Mountains and occupy them. That is why. The Loremasters were going to take over the mining villages and choke off the supply of crystals to the rest of Noraam, taking what crystals are left for themselves. And once the crystals powering the alchemical devices of the kingdoms ran out, they were going to use that confusion and chaos to take over the entire continent, using their alchemical devices against you when yours no longer have any power.

“That is what this is all about. The kings of Noraam are protecting themselves from the Loremasters, who tried to carry out a plan which would have made them the rulers of everything. That’s why they’re besieging Avannar, soldiers of the Loreguard. This isn’t about them breaking the alliance, it’s about you breaking the alliance. I spoke to an officer in the Loreguard whom I know very well, and she told me that if the common soldier knew the truth, knew that fighting in the upcoming battle was a violation of the oaths they took when they joined the Loreguard, they would refuse. And that’s exactly why I’m telling you this now.

“You, soldiers of the Loreguard, may be soldiers for the Loremasters, but you are loyal subjects of your kingdoms first. You are Cariners, Phionis, Mallans, Baltons, Freeman, Yorans, Hamms, Alamari, Georvans. You have homes, you have families, you have friends and you have plans to return to those lives after you’ve finished your soldiering and earn enough money to go back with a nice heavy purse. And if you fight for the Loreguard, you are fighting against your own kingdoms. You are jeopardizing that life you plan to lead once you finish your enlistment. Simply put, soldiers of the Loreguard, you are on the wrong side. And know this. Fighting against the kingdoms threatens the very families and villages from which you came, for the kings of Noraam know what I have just told you.

“After taking Avannar, every single army surrounding you has the same orders,” the image said grimly. “Every single one has received orders to immediately march west and secure the mining villages for their

kingdom, because the mines in the Free Territories, southern Mallan, and northern Carin are the last ones producing crystals in any quantity. Destroying Avannar is only the first half of the battle to come, for those armies will then turn on each other,” the image said in a dark voice. “There will be a running battle from Avannar all the way to the foothills of the Green Valley as armies try to get there first, secure the mining villages, and hold them while they take whatever crystals they can get out of them.

“Simply put, soldiers of the Loreguard, you are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Were you not here, the armies would pass Avannar by after capturing the Loremasters and then turn on each other. To save your own lives, all you must do is walk away. I guarantee you, the armies of the kingdoms would probably welcome you among them, for they’re going to need every soldier they can get once the Loremasters are out of the way and the kingdoms have to vie against each other for what crystals there are left. Every soldier will matter, and every soldier will be defending his own kingdom, his own village, his own friends and family. You are literally standing between a bear and a cougar who want to fight each other, and if you try to hold your ground, both the bear and the cougar are going to tear you apart as they claw at each other. All you have to do is get out of the way, soldiers of the Loreguard. The Loremasters lied to you, and you’re now fighting for the wrong side. Your own kingdoms are going to need you, and you’re not very much use to them if you’re dead.

“Naturally, the Loremasters will tell you I’m lying. After all, not only am I a Shaman, but I’m the nefarious black fox Shaman,” the image said with a strange smile. “But think about what you already know. Think about what rumors you’ve heard. Then look at them together. You’ll see that my explanation of what’s going on actually makes sense, where what the Loremasters will tell you won’t make any sense at all. They’re counting on you to not think, to just be dumb soldiers following orders. But all you have to do is ask yourself what makes more sense, what I just told you, or what they will tell you.” The image seemed to tilt his head and turn slightly, looking down. “The Arcans? Oh yes, they’re out there,” it said, as if answering someone. “An army of them, to the west. That army marches

under no human banner. It is the army of Haven, the lands of the free Arcans, who dwell on the other side of the continent. When the Loremasters sent the Loreguard into the frontier as the first stage of their plan to take over Noraam, with the orders to establish a base to stockpile crystals out of reach of any kingdom, the Arcans of Haven were forced to respond. They couldn't allow the Loremasters to establish a foothold on the west side of the Smoke Mountains. I'm certain you don't believe me when I say that there's an entire nation of free Arcans, so I won't even try to persuade you. All you really need to understand is that the Arcans are here to crush the Loremasters. Once Avannar is a smoking ruin, they'll retreat back to the west, if only just to get out of the way of the armies of the twelve kingdoms when they engage in war with one another. That is not their fight, and they want nothing to do with it. Once the Loremasters are wiped out, the Arcans will withdraw back to the west. If you don't want to fight the Arcans, then don't protect the Loremasters. Stand aside, and they will do you no harm. That is their sole reason for being here. Once all the Councillars are dead or captured, and the headquarters of the Loremasters burned to the ground, they will leave."

The image seemed to sweep its gaze along the walls, as if making eye contact with every soldier standing atop them. *"You've heard the truth, soldiers of the Loreguard. The Loremasters will tell you I'm lying, but all you have to do is think about it, and maybe you'll see that in this case, the liar speaks the truth, while the honest man is lying through his teeth. Don't be mindless. Think about it. Ask questions, and don't take no for an answer, at least until they send down an order that makes it illegal for anyone to question them...and let that in itself be one of the things you think about. If they're afraid to answer your questions, then they clearly have something to hide. Also, know this. The armies of Flaur and Georvan will be here in two days, and the Alamari and Nurysians are only a day behind. In three days, the combined armies of all of Noraam will attack Avannar. You have three days to search out the truth, then decide what to do about it when you finally admit that I'm not lying."*

“How you handle that truth is up to you. Just don’t let your last act be as the doomed defenders of those who are using you as nothing but living shields to protect their own hides. They’ll let you die as they use their alchemical devices to flee, if they haven’t started abandoning ship already. Don’t die for those who have lied to you, because your own families are going to need you. Be wise, soldiers of the Loreguard. Be wise.

“Be wise.”

And then, the darkened formation of shadowy mist stopped moving. It shuddered, the darkness drained from it like water from a hole in a barrel, and then the mist evaporated.

It was fairly impressive, but what the people of Avannar didn’t know was that it made Kyven pass out to do it.

He woke up nearly six hours later in a wagon, laying on a pile of blankets with Danna riding Vasha beside it, looking down at him almost every other second. Nightfall had brought him back to the army after he delivered his warning, since he was unconscious, and she and Toby were in the seat, driving the wagon, with Ebony sitting on the tailgate and the boys walking on the other side. And behind the wagon, on Strider, rode Wilson Danvers. Kyven’s head was pounding, his belly was gnawing on itself it was so empty, and he was parched. He hadn’t pushed himself like that in a while, and he also hadn’t got as much exercise as he needed to lately, which was wearing away his Shaman endurance a tiny bit. He put a hand to his head and sat up as Danna leaned towards him. “Kyven! Are you okay?”

“Just tired, I overextended myself. I need meat. Raw meat. And some water.”

“We have it ready for you, Shaman,” Ebony said, turning and making a waving motion.

“What did you do that did this to you, Kyv?” Danvers asked.

“I told the Loreguard soldiers in Avannar the truth,” he answered. “I’m hoping that if they know what’s really going on, some will desert. That’s one less soldier that we may have to fight.”

“All of them at once?”

“And that’s why I’m in a sickbed,” he replied with a weary smile. “It was a pretty big illusion.”

“Ah.”

Clover and Dancer brought up a large open basket filled with small cuts and slices of beef and venison, all raw, and Fastpaw passed in a waterskin. Kyven drained it in one draw, then attacked the basket as soon as Clover handed it to him, stuffing the bite-sized cuts of meat into his mouth almost without chewing. They watched him for a moment, then Danna rather nimbly slid a leg over the saddle and slid down into the wagon. He paused in his ravening to put a hand on her shoulder, and she sat down with him as Lucky appeared, hefting himself up and over and into Vasha’s saddle. The Equar pranced a bit as if to throw him, but she settled down and let him guide her. “Danna told me what you told her, Kyv,” Danvers said. “You seriously want us to betray the others?”

“They fully intend to betray us,” Kyven replied between bites. “I told you, Wilson, DeVaur intends to kill us both personally. That death machine he’s lugging, he intends to use it on *us*, not on the Loreguard. DeVaur now has official orders from Flaur to wipe as many of us out as possible, and capture the survivors for sale in the markets of Flaur. I’m just going to do to him what he intends to do to us *first*. If I have my way, Wilson, this army won’t fire a shot. We’ll take the field to the west and look threatening, and as soon as the armies of Noraam engage Avannar, we pull back. We only get the army involved if it looks like the Loreguard are going to repel the attack. Meanwhile, we make it look like we’re doing our part because me and the other shadow fox Arcans will be out there wreaking havoc on Loreguard positions.”

“Yes, Danna told me your plan, and it’s fairly cunning.”

“Every weapon we take is a weapon they can’t use against us, but we can use against them,” he replied simply, taking a second waterskin Fastpaw gave him. “They’ll believe the Shaman are doing their work as a vanguard for the Arcans engaging, when in reality we’re just letting the humans do our work for us. Once we’ve taken enough cannons and alchemical siege weapons, the Loreguard will fall. There’s just too many men out there for them to repel with muskets, especially when the attackers will be lobbing cannonballs and blackjacks and mana bombs into Avannar. And they don’t have enough close quarters alchemical weapons to go around. When it gets within range of shockrods and firetubes, it’ll be over.”

“I can’t argue with that analysis,” Danvers agreed. “But we can’t just withdraw.”

“This isn’t our fight, Wilson. Our fight will be at Atan, when those seething masses stop fighting each other and come after *us*. And it’s going to happen,” he grunted. “The kings of Balton and Mallan are discussing an alliance against everyone else. That’s going to come about. I foresee several of those alliances forming, and ultimately, it’s going to be the northern kingdoms against the southern kingdoms. The northern kingdoms are more organized and closer than the southern kingdoms, but the southern kingdoms have numbers, and lots of them. Flaur’s army itself outnumbers half the armies of the northern kingdoms combined, so they’ll ally themselves for common defense. Once the Flaurens and their southern allies are defeated, *then* they’ll turn on each other.”

Danvers was quiet a long moment. “Then your idea might be our best course of action,” he grunted. “We’ll still need to have a conference to work out exactly how it’s going to happen, so our officers know what to do.”

“After we stop for the day. We should be there late tomorrow at this pace, which is about right on time. Actually, we need to get there in the dark, where we can set up without worrying about a Flauren sneak attack. They won’t have the ability to set any traps for us, since they can’t see in the dark, and since there’s no moon tonight, it works even more in our favor. And the first thing we do when we get there is dig in. Even the

Flaurens will think twice about attacking us if we're ready for them. I want them to wake up in the morning and see us sitting behind extensive fortifications that not even DeVaur would want to assault, given how many troops we have."

"We can work that out. I'll need you to scout out the best place for us to set up. Someplace defensible."

"I can do that tonight," he replied. "At least after I get some rest. I'm more or less wiped out." He pointed at Ebony. "Not a word, you," he warned, which made her just smile, a touch smugly. "I'll need to rest before I can even get out of this wagon. I don't think I could channel a candle lit right now," he said, stuffing another piece of meat into his mouth. "Fuck, I don't think I can even stand up," he amended, which made Danna put her arm around him.

"Po' baby. Should we have one o' the Arcans breast feed yah?" Toby asked lightly.

"Remember that anything you say now may come back to bite you in the ass later, Toby," Kyven replied, which made him laugh.

"Ayah, Ah sho' know how you can hold a grudge, Kyv," he said with a glance back, a smile on his muzzle.

"We'll make sure you get plenty of rest, Shaman," Ebony declared. "Even if I have to tie you to the wagon."

"That'll work until I get my strength back, woman, then you and me are going to have words," he replied.

"Then hush and eat, so you can get away from me that much sooner," she urged, putting her hands under the basket and pushing it up.

It was a dark, cool night. The clouds were blocking the light of the stars and what little moon there was, but those using the well-traveled trail needed very little light to see. The ruins of Deep River were visible down at

the base of the ridge as the caravan of sixty Arcans and fifty mules started down, each one heavily loaded down with supplies for the army, particularly the much-needed Briton rifles. The mules were carrying the larger boxes and crates while every Arcan in the host was carrying monstrous packs filled with other gear and supplies, heavier than most humans could even lift, but those Arcans had carried those packs all the way from Haven, and done it at a pace that would have killed most horses. Only the sturdy mules were capable of keeping up with the Arcans, having been told how serious things were by one of the two Shaman escorting the group, with twelve fighting Arcans arrayed out both in front and behind to provide protection for the brave volunteers that had ported the desperately needed supplies to the army.

One of those Shaman bristled mightily against this assignment, but he carried it out to the best of his ability. The massive black wolf, Stalker, he wanted to be with the *army*, not here leading a supply caravan. The army would be fighting the humans, and there was no other place Stalker wanted to be but in a place where he got to kill humans. Stalker's hatred of humanity was well known among the circles of his brothers and sisters, but it was simply who he was, and not even his Walk and the wisdom of experience had altered his viewpoint very much. Certain humans, he could tolerate. Fewer still he could respect, such as Virren Bandarr from Atan, and many members of the Masked, who risked their lives for his enslaved brothers and sisters. But the rest of humanity, they had nothing but his scorn.

"We're making good time," Greeneyes said casually. The little female cat Shaman was well named, for she had the greenest, most lucid and captivating eyes that most had ever seen. She barely came up to Stalker's chest, but despite her small size, she was the leader of this expedition due to the fact that she had walked the path nearly five years longer than Stalker. Among them, that gave her seniority. She also had the most unusual coloration. She had dark orange fur with red stripes through it, and a single splotch of brown over her left eye that went all the way up to her ear, making one ear orange and the other brown.

“We need to make better time,” Stalker growled as the caravan started down the trail to the remains of Deep River. “They need these weapons *now*, and we are days away!”

“Patience, young brother,” she said soothingly. “We are already three days ahead of schedule thanks to the courage and determination of our porters. They have done so well, and I am proud of them,” she said as they passed, which made almost every Arcan within earshot pick up the pace a little bit.

The caravan worked its way down the ridge, zig-zagging along the trail, until it came down to the ruins of Deep River. The humans had taken the settlement apart to build fortifications, and the walls they built were all that was left. The humans had surrendered to that human, Danna Pannen, and all that was left were the walls and a series of graves dug past the walls, on the flat area near the river. They had fought at first, but then the inevitability of their situation made them come to their senses.

But Deep River wasn’t completely abandoned. There was a single human remaining in Deep River, a man with black hair and wearing a blue cotton shirt sitting sedately cross-legged by a small fire where cobbled corn was roasting on sticks set over the fire and a butchered doe’s meat resting on its own pelt right beside him, his back to the collapsed part of the wall facing the river, where the humans had knocked it down in order to get the army out relatively quickly. Two fighting Arcans were close by, muskets readied, but Greeneyes laughed and hurried up to the solitary figure, then flopped down and threw her arms over his shoulders from behind. “Kyven!” she said happily. “What brings you here, my brother?”

“I was just passing by, Greeneyes,” he replied calmly. “Please, sit, eat. I hunted this for you.”

Stalker came over and looked over his shoulder, and saw that it was indeed Kyven. Kyven Steelhammer, the *human* Shaman. He seemed to have come a long way from the winter he spent in Haven. He looked confident, calm, self-assured...*powerful*. This human was no Shaman to be taken

lightly, the wolf could sense. He had grown into his full power, and that gave him an aura of competence that anyone with any training would sense immediately. Stalker had wondered at the wisdom of the very spirits he served when he was sent to train Kyven, but now he felt ashamed for doubting them. Clearly, they had seen something in Kyven that he himself had not.

Kyven walked the path.

“Brother,” Stalker said, *meaning* it as he came around and sat by the fire facing Kyven and Greeneyes. “You have grown much since we last met. I can sense it.”

“I’m glad you feel that way, Stalker, because I came here for you.”

“Me? What do you need of me, brother?”

“I need a Shaman not afraid to get his hands bloody,” Kyven replied grimly. “You and me, brother, and Clover and Dancer, we are going to set all the Arcans free.”

“How are you going to do such a thing, brother,” Greeneyes asked, leaning her head more over his shoulder and looking at him.

“Sit. I hunted enough venison for your entire host, they’re over there,” he pointed. “Everyone take a short rest, and I’ll explain it to you.”

The caravan broke for a rest. The brave Arcans, who were pushing themselves to exhaustion every day, found nearly three dozen deer laying out by the north wall, waiting for them. They sat down to eat as Kyven explained his plan to Stalker and Greeneyes. They gasped and stared at him more than once as they took in his audacious plan, but after he was finished, Greeneyes nodded soberly. “With the human armies engaged against both our brave army and each other, it has a chance to work,” she reasoned. “They will be spread too thin to counter a massive Arcan rebellion.”

“I know. But this won’t just be a rebellion, sister. I fully intend to leave smoking ruins behind me everywhere I go,” he said, his eyes almost

haunted. “This is as much about beating the fact that the Arcans are free into the heads of the humans as it is about freeing the Arcans. If they don’t understand, completely understand, that the Arcans are sentient beings, then it does nothing to free them. The Arcans must *win* their freedom, sister, and that will require the humans witnessing the Arcans rising up and *taking* it. What I’m doing, it’s as much going to be warfare as what will be happening in the Smoke Mountains.

“And that’s why I need *you*, Stalker,” he said, looking at the wolf. “Of all the Shaman, you and me are best suited for a grim task such as this. Like I said, I need a Shaman willing to get his hands bloody.”

“And you have mine,” he declared immediately. “I understand what you insinuate without saying, brother. This will be a campaign of terror, to strike such fear into the humans that they never dare cross the Arcans again. I may be called upon to slaughter the innocent, leave children hungry and homeless..”

He sighed and nodded. “So I need Shaman who have the fortitude to be able to do something terrible. I know it almost sounds like an insult, brother —“

“It’s far from an insult,” he replied gruffly. “You need Shaman not afraid to kill. I am the Shaman you seek. A wise Shaman understands himself before others, brother. I know that I am not a gentle or kind Shaman. I know that my hatred of the humans is unreasonable, but I cannot help it, and I have the capacity for bloodshed. It is who I am, and now, it will be put to use to help free our people from slavery. That makes it a good thing, at least in this case.”

“Then understand that what we do will forever mark all of us, brother,” Kyven warned. “There will be repurcussions, and they might be greater than what evil we do against the humans.”

“If the end result is that our brothers and sisters are free, then I will face them with a high head and nothing but pride in what I have done,” he replied simply.

“Then so be it,” Kyven said, reaching over and putting his hand on Stalker’s shoulder. “Welcome to the rebellion, brother.”

“I will not fail you, brother,” Stalker replied, clapping Kyven’s shoulder. “When do we start?”

“After the battle at Avannar. Remain with Greeneyes and the caravan for now, brother, we need those supplies and this caravan will need you. When you reach the army, seek me out, and I’ll explain things in greater detail.”

“Then it will be so,” he replied with a simple nod. “How far are we from the army?”

“You’re about two to three days from Atan, if you push it,” he replied. “The battle will begin in two days, as soon as the Alamari and Nuryrians reach Avannar, and then the Arcans will fall back to Atan. Most likely, I’ll meet you there. And from there, we’ll leave for Flaur to start our task.”

“Then we will be in Atan in two days, brother,” Greeneyes promised him.

“And as soon as we reach Atan, I will come to you, brother, no matter where you are.”

“Good, because I’m going to need you, my brother,” Kyven said, then he took a bite of a piece of raw venison. “What we’re going to do is going to destroy Noraam, but it must be done. It must be done,” he sighed.

“It will free our people from slavery and bring peace and balance to Noraam. I say it is a good thing,” Stalker replied calmly. “Sometimes, what is broken must be taken apart so it may be rebuilt into something that works.”

“Wise words, brother,” Greeneyes nodded. “Wise words.”

They sat and talked of lesser affairs, but Stalker’s mind wasn’t in the conversation. Long ago, he had doubted the wisdom of the spirits in selecting a human to walk among them. And now, sitting with a human that

understood what had to be done, and was willing to conduct it against his own...he was a fool for doubting them. Kyven Steelhammer *was* a Shaman. Kyven Steelhammer walked the path.

Kyven Steelhammer was his *brother*.

Chapter 24

Not since the winter in Haven had he had so much time with Danna.

Kyven stayed by her side the rest of the march, leaving only to scout out the best place to set up the army that had maximum defensive potential. Actually, he didn't stay by her side so much as made her ride on Vasha with him, either carrying her in front of him in the saddle or letting her ride behind him. He much preferred carrying her in front of him, since it let him put his arms around her and look her in the eyes, and Danna certainly didn't seem to mind. She was a very strong, decisive woman, but she was indeed a *woman*, and enjoyed the attention that Kyven lavished on her once he was strong enough to spank Ebony for being so pushy and ride on his own. Danna got to indulge in being treated like more than the general of the Arcan army, and her officers and the Shaman were willing to look the other way when she and Kyven didn't act in a very leader-like fashion.

That night, he finally told her what he planned to do, and he didn't pull any punches. She looked almost horrified when she heard his plan, and what was more, heard what he intended to do. Simply put, Kyven would march up the Flauren peninsula and raid, loot, pillage, and plunder everything in his path. Every town and village would be burned down, every single human that resisted would be killed, and he'd leave behind him a blackened scar littered with dead men, widowed wives, homeless children, and all of them starving. It would be a campaign of terror nearly as much as it would be a rebellion of enslaved Arcans, shattering the basic societal operation of towns up and down the peninsula, and they would only spread out as they grew in number, until, by the time they reached Georvan, they would be a wave of angry Arcans with orders to free every Arcan they encountered, take anything not nailed down, and kill anyone who tried to stop them. Kyven had a detailed and systematic plan that would ravage the entire Flauren peninsula, sack Tallasar, and leave nothing but hunger and

misery in their wake. And once they spread into Georvan, they would fan out into different armies that would attack every concentration of human inhabitation in the south. Not even Nurys would be spared from the carnage, for Kyven would prove that a ground army could take Nurys when he used highly mobile Arcans capable of moving through the swamps, take the city, burn it to the ground. After Nurys was a ruin, he would march up to Jackson City and Alexandra, sack those, then move up the western side of Noraam, targeting the western towns and the mining communities while the other element would march up the coast and lay waste to Lanna and Cheston.

The only kingdom that would be spared the sacking and pillaging would be Carin. Kyven owed Alak a debt, and while they wouldn't leave a single Arcan in Carin territory, they wouldn't march out and leave nothing behind them but smoking ruins.

Along the way, Kyven fully expected to meet organized armed response. Be it militias of villages or towns to recalled elements of the armies of the kingdoms, once the kings realized that Kyven was far more of a threat than the shortage of crystals would be. That crisis wasn't going to become critical for another five to ten years, but Kyven and his freed slaves would be rampaging through their kingdoms *right now*. When that came about, Kyven would have separated his freed slaves into two categories, soldiers and non-combatants. The soldiers would be the Arcans willing to fight, while the non-combatants would be the children, the old, and those Arcans too deeply ingrained into the slave mentality to be effective fighters. They would do non-combat work, doing the hunting, the cooking, the cleaning, the carrying, while the other Arcans protected them while on the march.

Once they reached the Free Territories, things would change. The Arcans not capable or not willing to fight would be sent on to Haven behind an army that would come up *behind* the humans laying siege to the mining villages, wipe them out, and then give the Arcans the chance to fully retreat back into the frontier without fear of being pursued. Meanwhile, Kyven would continue north along the coast, smash Balton, the colonies of Jenn,

bypass the cursed fen, crush the twin kingdoms of Hamm and Menn, then swing inland and lay waste to Yora, Phion, and Mallan. It would be winter about that time, and in the brutal cold of the Hamm winter, the Arcans would have a distinct advantage. Arcans were far more resistant to the cold than humans, though many in Hamm and Menn were adapted to the cold and would put up some resistance. Kyven would use the winter against his enemies, and when spring came, they would be marching back into the Free Territories from the north, through Atan, and into the frontier to forever leave Noraam behind.

The strategy of that was important. Haven simply could not support *all* the freed Arcans at once, so by splitting them into two major groups, it would give Haven at least some time to prepare for both waves, the initial wave coming in the early winter, then the second wave coming in the early summer. The winter would be long and lean for Haven and the massive influx of new Arcans, since the southern kingdoms had far more Arcans than the northern ones, but at least not *all* the Arcans would be going west. Kyven would ask for volunteers to continue the fight to free the rest of the Arcans, and he had little doubt he'd have enough brave Arcans to continue to risk their lives, and even die before seeing Haven, to protect those already freed and seek to liberate those still in bondage.

Arcans were far, far more courageous than most humans understood.

Danna could see that even in describing it, what was coming haunted Kyven. Being a destroyer, slaughtering good, decent men, leaving women homeless and innocent children starving, dying of famine and pestilence caused in the wake of his merciless march through Noraam, it was not in his nature, but in this case, what he wanted to do did not matter. What had to be done, *had* to be done, and it was his grim duty to carry it out. He had to cause a lot of misery now to prevent a potential eternity of unending horror and pain and humiliation of the Arcans at the hands of his own people. Kyven would shatter Noraam and leave it on the precipice of total destruction, but that, too, was part of the plan.

Andra could not save Noraam if Kyven did not destroy Noraam.

In Kyven's wake, Andra would heal the wounds he caused, bring peace, and restore balance. Andra would be the shining angel that would save Noraam and begin to change the people's views of the Arcans. It was Kyven's task to leave them broken and in despair, so that she might do her work.

Kyven would be the villain, and Andra would be the hero. Kyven's name would be reviled for as long as mankind had memory of what he had done, while Andra would forever be remembered as the one who healed Noraam and brought the wisdom of the spirits to the people. Darkness and light, good and evil, they were the harbingers. Kyven would spread death, disease, starvation, and despair across Noraam, and Andra would bring peace and kindness and happiness.

And that was the way it had to be, no matter how much Kyven desperately wished it wasn't so. But, he was consigned to his grim task, and the fate it would bring to him. For him, there would be no happy ending. But if his sacrifice brought about peace to Noraam, then so be it. He could live with it.

Danna was very attentive to him after hearing that, at least after getting over her bout of pique caused when she couldn't change his mind. Kyven knew the path he had to walk, and he would walk it no matter how much it hurt him...and Danna could not deny that his plan did have a certain kind of logic to it. When one planned sweeping and permanent change of an entire continent at a basic level, it required a society-altering event to bring it about. And what Kyven was going to do was exactly that. Danna was gentle and tender all the next day, showing him by her actions rather than her words that no matter how much a villain Kyven had to become, she *understood*, and she would forgive him the sins he knew he had to commit to do his job. Danna knew his heart, and in a way, she knew that after he was done, he would need her, desperately need her, to come to terms with the horror he had inflicted upon his own kind. Though the villain Kyven must be, he would be quite the reluctant villain.

But, that reluctance would not stay his hand when he issued orders that he knew would result in the deaths of innocent women and children, by famine and pestilence if not by outright violence.

At sunset, however, the immediate situation took command. They were marching in on Avannar, and Kyven, Toby, and Nightfall shadow walked in the vanguard of the army to give the final scouting and inspection of his chosen site. It was a long, tall ridge west-southwest of Avannar, that would give them optimal visibility of both the city and the southern armies. They had already arrived, having just marched in from Riyan, and DeVaur was overseeing the dispensation of his troops as a long line primarily to the south and east of the ruins of South Avannar. The ridge Kyven had chosen was too far to be a tactical position in the siege of New Avannar, which would require a dangerous crossing of the formidable Podac River. It was actually safer to cross the much wider sections around Avannar than the narrower part northwest of the city, since the river ran much faster and had several stretches of rapids and waterfalls. DeVaur had crossing boats at his disposal, but he didn't have a collapsible alchemical bridge. That was something only the Loreguard had, and Kyven had made sure to keep it out of the hands of DeVaur for just this reason. Kyven didn't want DeVaur to have any viable reason to move west, because he knew that was where the Arcan army was coming into the campaign theater. The Arcans were intended to prevent any retreat of the Loreguard to the west on the south side of the Podac river, as well as assault Old Avannar from the southwest, coming over the river. DeVaur and the combined armies of the south would have to cross to the east of Old Avannar and assault its southeast wall, while the Baltons, Mallans, and Phioni attacked the northern and northwestern walls. The Hammish, Mennish, Yorans, and Jenn Colonists would be mixed in with the Balton and Mallans, but not *completely*, since every army had orders to drop everything once the Loreguard surrendered and march west. DeVaur would hold a large portion of his army on the south side of the Podac River as reserves, but in reality that would be the spearhead of the Flauren advance on Atan.

Oh, how the intrigue was rampant among the kings and generals. There were no less than six different alliances forming out on that floodplain that held Avannar and the armies of most of Noraam. The Hammish and Mennish had always been virtually the same kingdom with two different monarch controlling the east and west sides of it, so they already had a secret alliance. The Phioni and the Baltons both had approached the Mallans for an alliance, and the king of Mallan intended to play both sides against each other. The Yorans were often called the Forgotten Kingdom because they were the most remote and distant of all the kingdoms in that they were completely landlocked, the *only* landlocked kingdom. The cursed fen prevented them from building any sea ports, though there was a deep, long river that ran through the fen and out to sea that they used to get access to shipborne trade, even if some ships refused to cross the cursed fen to get to Yora. Yora and the Jenn Colonies had the unusual distinction of being a collection of independent cities like Alexandra and Jackson City to the south, and they were not considered kingdoms even though the nine cities of Yora and the three city-states of Jenn had treaties of mutual trade and defense with their own. There were the “twelve kingdoms of Noraam,” but Yora, the Jenn Colonies, and cities like Alexandra and Jackson City to the south weren’t considered part of them, while the city-state of Cheston *was* considered one of the twelve kingdoms because it had a king, and the Free Territories were considered the twelfth kingdom of Noraam because it had *once been* one of the twelve kingdoms, despite the fact that it was a kingdom no longer. Yora was a collection of what they called nine “counties” in the interior of northern Noraam, with each county having a capitol town that served as the governing body of the territory. Each of the nine counties sent three representatives to what they called the Yoran Congress, where the nine counties made laws and managed trade and cooperation between the nine counties. It was the only non-kingdom form of government on Noraam, more like a huge city council form of government, and it was effective enough for the Yorans to prosper. Three of the nine counties of Yora were dominated by the Amishar, and their pacifistic religious beliefs made any attempts to have Yora militarize very tricky. The cities that made up the Jenn Colonies were three independent

coastal cities running from the edge of Phion that touched the Angry Sea with their seaport city of Edgewood to the north down to the border of Balton to the south. Kyven remembered that map that Danvers had showed him, that the Jenn Colonies were in a place once called *Delaware* and southern *New Jersey*, with Phion claiming that narrow sliver of land north of it between Jenn and the cursed fen, where Yora was the western areas of a place called *New York*, south of the easternmost of the five Inner Seas, the Eerie Sea.

Funny how their names had changed over the years, but not so much that the roots of them were not evident.

The alliances to the south were much more straightforward. Flaur and Georvan had a working alliance already, and the other southern kingdoms, Carin, Alamar, and Nurys, were more or less folded into their combined banner. The longstanding enmity between Flaur and Nurys was evident, but the Nurysians weren't about to go against Flaur when they had *everyone else* on their side. The alliance between the Flaurens and the Georvans wouldn't survive long past the fall of Avannar unless the northern kingdoms displayed an obvious alliance

Six kingdoms to the south with Alexandra and Jackson City, five to the north in addition to Yora and Jenn, and the Free Territories smack in the middle.

Nightfall and Toby were hunkered down on all fours with Kyven standing between them, all of them watching the torches, alchemical lights, and campfires of the Flaurens start to flare as they continued to set up camp. "They movin' pretty quick," Toby noted, sitting on his haunches.

"They've set enough camps. They're starting to dig fortifications, too," Kyven noticed, most of them turned towards the west. "DeVaur intends to send an attacking force south and swing around to hit us from the southwest, behind what he expects our lines to be. That's what most of his reserves were told to do while the rest of the army deals with Avannar. That

will open the path to Atan for Flaur, with DeVaur's own men controlling the Atan Road."

"But we're ready for them," Nightfall noted. "And they don't know that."

"Exactly, friend," Kyven answered, kneeling down on one knee between them. "I already told Danvers what they intend to do, and he'll set a trap for them. Most of the fighting we do will be against the Flaurens, not the Loreguard." He took out his talker. "Wilson," he called.

"We're here, Kyven. How does it look?"

"The ridge is clear," he replied. "DeVaur is starting to dig in more or less where you thought he would. He'll redeploy when he sees how we're set up in the morning."

"The Shaman have cast spells for us that will let the humans in the army see as well as an Arcan in the dark," he replied. "We should be able to move in, set up, and even dig in without them knowing. Have they deployed scouts yet?"

"We haven't seen any. How far are you out?"

"An hour," he answered. "Our advance scouts will be up to your position in a matter of minutes. Those scouts will be taking care of DeVaur's scouts," Danvers chuckled. "Just hold your positions and keep an eye on them."

"Toby and Nightfall are going to reconnoiter their encampments," Kyven said. "They can do it in the shadow world, so DeVaur will never see them."

"Excellent idea! Please do so, I want to know exactly where they have everything deployed, from artillery to the location of DeVaur's personal tent."

"We can do that, General Danvers, no problem," Toby said. "Ah can have a map ready fo' y'all by the time yo' arrive."

“Go ahead and get started,” Kyven told them. “Remember, give the *things* no reason to lurk nearby. We don’t want them causing problems when we start stealing artillery. Toby, you check the city and make sure everything’s still in the same place. Nightfall, you look over DeVaur’s army, then range out and find the Alamari and Nurysians so we’ll know when they get here.”

“No problem, friend,” Toby nodded.

“Easily done, Kyven,” Nightfall told him, brushing her long, long black hair back over her shoulder, then her body was consumed by shadows, covering her from head to foot and turning her into what appeared to be a two-dimensional apparition whose silhouette was the only thing discernable. Toby’s body melded to become shadow the same way, then both of them vanished when a converged shadow gateway appeared under each of them and traveled up over their bodies, sending them into the shadow world and to their task.

Nightfall’s rather ostentatious manner of creating shadow gateways had infected all four of them, Kyven mused with a chuckle.

Kyven held his position and used a spyglass to peer over at DeVaur’s combined armies. The glass only enhanced his normal vision, so when he switched to spirit sight, he had to rely on his own visual acuity. After about ten minutes, a silent ghost settled beside him, but his spirit sight had let him see her coming. It was Lightfoot, her body as visible as day to his spirit sight, and she slapped him lightly on the shoulder. “Humans will see your eyes, stop that,” she chided him in a whisper.

“Sorry,” he replied, closing his eyes to the spirits. “Toby and Nightfall are shadow walking through their camps to give us detailed intelligence on how they’re deployed. Did Wilson tell you what to do?”

She nodded. “Scouts.”

“That’s what he said. Go ahead and get started, friend. I’m to hold the ridge and wait for the army.”

“Keep your eyes dark,” she warned, then darted off into the darkness. She never made a sound...which was how she earned the name Lightfoot.

It took the army about two hours for the first elements to arrive. They were Arcans carrying packs, the wagons well behind, and as soon as they arrived, they had Kyven point out how the defenses needed to be set up. They immediately fell to digging trenches, piling the earth up on the downslope side, and Kyven was impressed at how quietly they worked. The human camps would be relatively quiet, but the little noise they did make would conceal the efforts of the Arcans to dig in, the trenches being the foundation of the fortifications behind which the army would prepare. Kyven didn't help, because he had to save all his strength, and the Arcans knew it. So there were no incriminating looks his way as they dug and he kept watch over the Flauren positions from his distant perch.

Nightfall stepped out of the shadows beside him, the dark shadow bleeding out of her fur. “I'm finished,” she said quietly. “Toby's still looking over the city defenses.”

“Show me,” he said, kneeling.

Nightfall knelt as well, then Kyven created a map of illusion on the ground in front of them, the lay of the land perfectly duplicated. She used circles of shadow placed over his illusion to represent important features. “The death machine is here,” she said, pointing to the western edge. “His men are still putting the rifled cannons together here, here, and here. They're already set up and ready here, here, and here. He has two repellers, here and here, and this position has three blackjacks and two siege flame projectors,” she related as her finger stabbed different parts of the shadow. “The acid launcher and mana bomb weapon are here. He has men working on a palisade right here by the river's edge east of the city.”

“That's where he's going to cross,” Kyven grunted, scratching his chin. “What about the heavy cannons? Those ten stone ones?”

“They're not in place yet,” she replied. “They're still in their towing configuration.”

“He’s waiting to see where and how we set up before placing those,” he reasoned. “Troops?”

“The tents are set up behind this ridge, but right now, most of the men are out working,” she said, sliding her finger along a valley behind a ridge to the southeast.”

“How about the Georvans?”

“They’re set up immediately to DeVaur’s east,” she answered, spreading her hand over the map. “Here. They’re also building a fortified position by the river here, by this little island where you once put the supplies I took Danna’s army. All of their alchemical weapons are set up in a heavily defended position on top of this hill, and they have cannons at set intervals along this ridge,” she pointed. “The Georvan mountaineers are already out and on the move. They got in boats and crossed the river about an hour ago, right here,” she said, putting her finger on a section of river. “I didn’t follow them to see what they were doing, but I’d guess they’re going to do something sneaky. They’re good at that.”

Kyven remembered how they’d turned the tide at the battle of Durm, and he nodded.

“Did you check for the Alamari and Nurysians?”

“Yes, and that’s the strange part,” she replied. “They’re not coming this way anymore.”

“What?”

“They’ve turned almost due west, just north of Fredick’s Burrough,” she replied. “I think they’re not coming.”

Kyven considered that, then he chuckled. “Those sneaky bastards, they’ve formed their own alliance and they’re backstabbing Flaur and Georvan. They’re circling their armies around and attacking the mine villages *now*. I’m impressed,” he said lightly, then he pulled out his talker. “Wilson.”

“What is it, Kyven?” came the reply a moment later.

“Tell Clover to tell my brothers and sisters to send out the warning to the southern mining villages. The Alamari and Nurysians have backed out of the alliance with Flaur and are moving into the mountains just on the south edge of the Green Valley. Atan and Brackenveld are the two villages closest to their position. Tell them to get ready to repel them, and Danna might want to send reinforcements down to Brackenveld.”

“That’s a gutsy thing to do,” Danvers breathed. “If Flaur comes out of the battle of Avannar with its army intact, they’ll turn on Alamar and Nurys for their deception.”

“Alamar and Nurys are gambling that if *they* have the mines, they won’t have to worry about Flaur,” Kyven reasoned. “But, we can’t make it easy on them. I’ll tell DeVaur that the other armies have betrayed him, he might send men to stop them. That just helps *us* if the Alamari and Nurysians are trapped between two armies.”

“It can if the mining villages are heavily fortified. The Alamari will take their chances against a Flauren army on an open field rather than assault a fortified position.”

“Yup. The two armies beat each other up, then we finish off the winner.”

“But, it does mean that DeVaur won’t have to wait for them to arrive now. The battle will start in earnest tomorrow,” Kyven surmised.

“Most likely. You can’t just let an army sit around before a battle anyway, Kyven.”

“I’m waiting for Toby to get back from his check of the city. I’ll get back to you when he’s done.”

“We’ll be up there in about twenty minutes, my friend. So you won’t have to wait long.”

Kyven waited only a moment longer before Toby stepped out of the shadows. “A’ight, Kyv,” he called quietly. “Nothin’s changed. All the artillery be right where they had it last night,” he reported.

“Troops?”

“Kinda hard tah tell,” he replied. “They’s quartahed in the buildin’s, set so they can deploy tah most any wall quick once the alarm goes off.”

“Alright. Rest a bit, friend, because we’re gonna need our energy in just a few hours.”

Toby nodded. “C’mon, babe, let’s sit a spell.”

Toby and Nightfall moved more or less out of the way of the working Arcans. Danna, Danvers, and most of the officer staff arrived about fifteen minutes later, surrounded by rifle-bearing Arcans and Shaman. The officers immediately surrounded Kyven as he created a detailed illusion of the entire area, complete with troop positions, artillery placements, and known fortifications. “As soon as DeVaur finds out the Alamari and Nurysians backstabbed him, he’ll contact the northern armies and begin the attack,” Danvers began. “We’re going to follow Kyven’s advice and partake in our own share of deception. We’ll allow the humans to engage, bring our forces forward, but intentionally dawdle and stall when it comes to trying to cross the river,” he explained, pointing at the island holding the Black Keep. “Our supposed point of attack will be here. Marshall, your platoon of cavalry is responsible for holding this ground. Avoid any combat you can, and make it *look* like you’re preparing a river crossing. Dig in, clear the shore of obstacles as best you can, then hold your position.”

“I can do that, General,” the cavalry Colonel nodded.

“I want this area here prepared to use our artillery and siege weapons,” he said, drawing his finger up the ridge. “Set up what we have and prepare for what the shadow fox Arcans and Kyven steal for us. That will be our only contribution to the battle. Bierren, the cannons we have are under your flag. Use them to support Marshall to hold the riverbank. With them up on

this ridge, we'll have complete visibility and trajectories of fire to keep Devaur off him."

"Easy job, General."

"Shaman Clover, I want you to bring the Arcan infantry up to this point and stage them, make it look like you're preparing to rush Marshall's fortified position to execute a river crossing," he told her. "Since Danna will be busy stealing siege weapons, it falls to you to command until she's done and can re-assume command of the Arcans."

"I can manage that, friend," she nodded.

"Once everyone is in position, we simply hold and wait. Once it looks apparent that the kingdoms are going to break into Avannar, then we pull back as quickly as we can. So everyone, make sure your soldiers are ready for a quick withdrawal," he ordered. "Kyven. What do you intend to do?"

"Kill them," he replied with dark eyes. "Keep our forces out of Avannar at all costs, Wilson. Don't let a single one of our people in there, because nowhere around Avannar will be safe."

"That's the plan."

"Patience. Are the Shaman ready?"

"We can begin the ritual any time, brother," she replied. "But are you sure it's what you want?"

"Yes. Fighting in the rain cuts down visibility. I don't want DeVaur to be able to clearly see what's going on. Make sure you don't let the rain become so heavy it causes the armies to pull back," he said intensely. "It needs to be misty and foggy enough to reduce visibility *without* making them abort. The less DeVaur can see, the more it benefits us."

"It will be exactly as you wish, brother," she replied.

"That's actually a good idea," Danvers nodded. "I had no idea you could do something like that, old friend," he smiled at Clover.

“Not alone I can’t. It takes a group of Shaman working together to work that kind of magic.”

“Longfang, the skirmishers under your command will keep an eye on our western and southern flanks,” Danvers said to the tall, raw-boned canine Arcan beside Danna. “I want an immediate report when DeVaur tries to flank us with his reserves.”

“It will be done, General.”

“The rest of you, we have to set up in a way that maximizes defense when he tries it. And he *will* try it,” Danvers said seriously. “If he intends to betray us, the best time to strike would be while we’re preparing our river crossing, with our forces divided and us oriented to protect from potential counter-attack from Avannar. We set our line here,” he said, pointing at Kyven’s illusory map. “They’ll come up this ridge spur and try to hit us here. It’s the only real way they can do it and have any advantage. It will be a cavalry and infantry attack, supported by his long-range cannons, which he’ll position to shell the ridge. Toby.”

“Yeah, General?”

“You think you can take out those cannons without getting hurt?”

“Ayah, easy fixin’s,” he replied with a grin. “You tell me when you want ‘em dealt with, and Ah’ll deal with ‘em.”

“Good. Help with sacking Avannar’s artillery, but keep a talker with you. When I need you to divert to the cannons, I’ll contact you.”

“Talkers don’t work in the shadow world,” Kyven warned. “Toby, check in with Wilson every five minutes once we start this.”

“Ah can do that, no problem,” Toby nodded.

“Don’t worry about them seeing you do it, Toby. When we take out their cannons, they’ll be just minutes from attacking us.”

“Ayah, good tah know. Danna, Ah’m gonna need at least ten annihilators out o’ the armory.”

“You’ll get what you need,” Danna replied.

“The rest of the army needs to prepare to march right back to Atan,” Danvers declared. “Brushtail, I want your scouts in complete control of the road. Don’t let a single Flauren scout so much as see it.”

“I’ll make sure of it, General,” the slender raccoon female replied.

“We hold here so the other armies see us, we look threatening, then as soon as it’s apparent Avannar will fall, we retreat,” he said in a calm yet intensely focused voice. “Marshall, the mercenaries and cavalry with us that were only here to get revenge on the Loremasters will be offered a discharge from the army if they so wish it once we get to Chardon. I don’t believe that all of them want to continue the war. They’ll get their final pay and be released with a horse and tack, enough supplies to see them through, and the Briton rifle they were issued to help get them safely home.”

“I’m glad you understand that, General,” Marshall said. “A few men have been saying exactly that.”

“Then make sure they know that they’ll get their final pay and their discharge with my blessing once we’re far enough from Avannar for them to escape into the Green Valley safely. They can head south and into the southern Territories, or go north towards Two River, then make their way home from there.”

“I’ll spread the word.”

“Good. They’ve been good men, but I’m not going to force them to carry on a war they didn’t sign up to fight. They signed on to fight the Loremasters, and once they’re defeated, their job is done. Any man that wants to stay on, we’ll accept him gladly, but those that want to go home will be given a discharge with full pay and my gratitude for their service.”

Several of the human officers looked much more enthusiastic after hearing that.

“Alright, gentlemen, ladies. We have a lot to do, so let’s get to it,” Danvers declared, clapping his hands. “Officers, take over your elements. Let’s get to work.”

The meeting broke up, with Danna coming over to him. She rather self-consciously started taking off her wrap, since she hadn’t quite mastered making her clothes merge into the shadow yet. She shed her clothes and stood beside Kyven, her tail slashing nervously, as he checked both of his pistols. “We’ll get started as soon as the Shaman bring up that fog on the river,” he told them. “DeVaur will see that as divine providence that the Loreguard won’t be able to see him cross, and that the fog will help conceal the movements of the men that will try to blindside us. How surprised he’ll be that we’re using it for almost exactly the same reason,” he said with a dark chuckle. “You three wait here. I’m going to bounce over and tell DeVaur exactly what he wants to hear.”

“Be careful, love. He wants to kill you,” Danna said, putting her hand on his forearm.

“He’ll have to find me first,” he said with a grim kind of smile, then holstered both of his pistols. He covered himself and his gear over with shadow. “Be back in a bit.”

DeVaur stepped out of his pavilion style tent as he buttoned up his uniform jacket, almost humming to himself. Everything was going almost exactly as he expected. The Loreguard was penned up inside Old Avannar, now surrounded on all sides on both sides of the river, and the Arcans were forming up on the ridge he fully expected them to occupy, far, far fewer than the Shaman had claimed. There were only about 40,000 Arcans in that army, which was a small force armed primarily with old muskets, and even a few using scythes and pitchforks. They were underequipped, small, and set up in a tactically unsound position...they were ripe for the taking. He

had intentionally left that ridge open and available to them because it looked defensible, but in actuality there was a backtrail up there that his men could use to attack them from behind, while all their attention was fixed on Avannar. His scrying devices had shown them up there digging in while cavalry prepared to advance, carrying timbers, spades, and what looked like the pieces of a pontoon bridge that they must intend to use to cross the river. His intelligence suggested that they were going to try to cross to the island holding the Black Keep, then use that as a base of operations to push into Avannar proper. Not a very bad plan, actually, and one that DeVaur had considered himself, but the Black Keep was within range of some of the nastier alchemical siege weapons the Loreguard had available. Ray-projection death machines and high-powered mana bomb launchers had the range to hit the grounds around the Black Keep.

The Georvans were fully on with his plan to attack and destroy the Arcan army. He had to promise them half the Arcans they captured, but that was a small price to pay to put the Georvans on the *east* side of Avannar while he had a sizable force *west* of Avannar, and on the right side of the river to march straight to Atan and occupy it. The *barrista* and the king had ordered him to take the mining villages to secure the remaining crystal supplies for Flauren use, which would make them the greatest power on Noraam.

A dark shimmer in the air directly in front of him was the only warning. The human Shaman stepped out of the darkness and right into the middle of the center of the Flauren encampment, almost arrogantly relaxed and unconcerned. If he only knew what plans DeVaur had for him. But for now, what the Shaman could tell him was worth more than the pleasure of watching the light fade from those cursed eyes.

“Field Marshall,” he said calmly, immediately turning and spreading his hands. A large illusory map of the area appeared, complete with colored blocks, circles, and X marks denoting troops and positions of various armies. A simple glance let him see his own forces, accurately displayed on the map, and what was of far more interest to him, the dispensation of that *fucking* Danvers and his Arcans. His trained mind absorbed it all quickly,

and he had to suppress a smile when he saw that the Arcans were orienting their defensive preparations *eastward*, to defend against a possible Loreguard counter-attack. They were completely unaware of the backtrail that led up the ridge.

Perfect. Just absolutely *perfect*.

“This is it,” Kyven said grimly.

“Oh, and just so you know, the Alamari and Nurysians betrayed us,” he said with a dark scowl. “Their army turned *west* just after they passed Fredick’s Burrough, and they’re heading for Brackenveld village.”

“What?” he gasped.

“I went and looked myself, Field Marshall. They’re cutting across country and heading for the Green Valley like their asses were on fire,” he relayed.

“The Nurysians, I would expect such behavior from them, but from the *Alamari*?” he said, honestly angered. “They have been our trading partners and friends for centuries!”

“I guess there’s no honor among kings, Field Marshall,” the Shaman grunted. “They’re honestly too far ahead now. They outflanked us,” he said ruefully.

“Exactly where are they, Steelhammer?” DeVaur asked angrily.

The illusion changed to a map of the northern Territories. “Right here,” he pointed, causing a red block to appear on the map. “Thirty minars west of Fredrick’s Burrough and on the move. They’ll make the southern end of the Green Valley in three days if they don’t slow down. There’s an old road that runs from Mansa to the ruins of a city that used to be right here,” he said, pointing at a spot ahead of the army. “It runs out from the west side of Mansa. The road hasn’t been used in decades, but it isn’t overgrown with trees quite yet. It’ll let your cavalry more or less meet them right at the entrance to the Green Valley.”

“As soon as I can spare some manpower, I’ll take care of that,” DeVaur said icily. “Those dirty snake-eating Cajar must have somehow tricked the Alamari into betraying us. Well, this is a declaration of war, and I’ll be more than happy that to wipe those dirt-skinned *graula* off the map!”

“Since we won’t have the Alamari and the Nurysians, it’s all going to go down today, DeVaur. I talked to the other commanders, and they told me the plan you proposed. They’re on board with it. The Mallans and Baltons are going to start their attack when you give the signal that you’re ready to cross the river, so they keep the Loreguard busy while you execute your crossing. Once you’re over, they’ll bombard the city with artillery and siege weapons, and once they’re weakened enough, every army will hit every wall at the same time, completely overwhelm the Loreguard in a coordinated assault.”

“Exactly as I laid it out for them,” DeVaur nodded.

“While you’re crossing on the east side, the Arcans are going to cross to the Black Keep and take it over, then use it as a fortress to come across and invade the city from the river,” he replied. “The Shaman and all their assets are going to be tied up in that, but with the Arcans invading the city proper from inside the walls, it’s going to pull critical Loreguard troops off the walls and give the rest of you the chance to get over them.”

“Audacious,” he said clinically. “That will be very difficult.”

“Well, the weather’s on our side,” he said. “It’s raining twenty minars upriver, and it’s moving this way. It’s a cold rain that’s raising a fog on the river. Once the river gets misty, the Loreguard won’t be able to see the Arcans very well, and that will let them cross.”

“Truly? That will help us cross as well,” DeVaur said with honest enthusiasm. “Have the Arcans hold their attack on Avannar until I give the signal. The invasion of the Arcans will cause troop redeployment inside Avannar that we can exploit.”

“Not a problem. The Shaman will be attacking Avannar once we have the Black Keep, it’ll be within their range. While they’re doing that, I’ll be making sure the Loreguard can’t break up your formations.”

“How so?”

“I’m going to enter the city and attack and destroy their siege weapons,” he replied. “When I’m done, there won’t be so much as a catapult left in Avannar. That’ll give our troops a much easier time getting into the city.”

“Exemplary,” DeVaur said. “Do so as quickly as you can. Every weapon destroyed is hundreds of our men saved.”

The Shaman nodded. “Since that rain’s coming, I’m waiting for that. When the rain starts, I’ll start taking out siege weapons.”

“Then the rain will be our universal signal to begin the attack,” DeVaur declared. “I’ll send the message to the other generals.”

“I’ll tell Danvers,” the Shaman said in a gruff voice, and the map wavered and vanished. “The rain should be here within the hour.”

“Then that is when we begin the attack. Deploy the men,” he called to one of his officers, who heard every word. “After Avannar has fallen, the generals intend to meet for a conference. It would be best if you were there,” DeVaur told the Shaman.

“I’ll make it if I can, but I’m going to be just a *little* busy today,” he said in that same intense voice, a voice much unlike him. Usually he was chatty...almost irritatingly *playful*. He seemed to relish in the chaos he caused, but this day, he was very serious. Then again, they were on the eve of the battle that would make DeVaur renowned as the greatest military tactician of his era, maybe even of *all time*, which would culminate with the destruction of the cursed Arcan army, and the eventual destruction of this mythical hidden city of theirs once DeVaur organized an expedition into the heart of the continent to flush them out and destroy them, an operation that would make him the richest man in Noraam.

But, that would be later. For now, he had a duty to perform for king and country.

“You seem disquieted,” DeVaur noted.

“My *wife* is going to be fighting in this battle, DeVaur,” he said. “I tried to convince her to stay out of it, but she won’t listen to me.”

“You’re married?”

“In our own way, yes,” he replied. “My wife is commanding the Arcans.”

“General Pannen?” DeVaur asked, and he nodded.

“She can take care of herself, but battles are large and chaotic, and it’s impossible to stay completely safe,” he complained. “Even the most careful man can be downed by a random bullet fired blindly. I would *much* rather her stay back with the reserves, but Arcans aren’t easy to command from a distance. She’ll have to be in the Black Keep, and that puts her in danger.”

“I’m sure she’ll be fine,” he said, quietly filing that information away. If the Shaman had a wife, and she was within reach of him...oh, the possibilities to pay that bastard back for the many indignities suffered at his hands. He’d have to keep scouts on the lookout for when the officers advanced to the Black Keep.

“I need to go, there are things I have to do,” the Shaman said in that same intense voice. “Be careful out there, DeVaur. All of Noraam needs you right now.” One of those circles of darkness appeared at the Shaman’s feet, then it swept up and over him, causing him to vanish. When the circle itself disappeared, DeVaur gave a malicious smile.

“Migel, prepare the reserves. The Arcans have no idea what’s about to happen,” he said with a nearly gleeful catch in his voice. “You know what to do?”

“Yes, Field Marshall,” the officer replied with a nod. “Move our men into position just before they divide their forces, then attack once they stage

to cross to the island. Every man will be carrying ten collars and stunsticks along with impact rods.”

“Good, good. Collar what you can, kill the rest. Once you take their position, storm up behind their advance forces and take their river crossing, trap the remainder on the island. We’ll force them to surrender. That’s just more profit for us. If they put up too much resistance, use the death machine, and we’ll solace ourselves with the Arcans in the Black Keep as our profit.”

“What about Danvers and Pannen?”

“Show them proper military courtesy,” he replied. “I’ll deal with them *personally*.” He turned to another man. “Are the area effect grounders ready?”

“Ready, Field Marshall. If we can draw the Shaman into the area, he’ll be helpless.”

“Oh, that will be *very* easy,” he chuckled, tugging on his uniform jacket to get it just so, to present the most dashing, confidently sharp appearance. “Ready my horse, and let’s win this battle.”

Kyven stepped out of the shadows just beside Danna, which made her glance at him. She’d felt him coming, so it was no surprise to her that he suddenly appeared. Toby and Nightfall were with her, the four shadow walkers standing at the vanguard of the army, for they would be the initial attack. Nightfall and Toby were similarly unclothed, except for Toby’s weapon belt and crossed bandoliers holding annihilators. Toby and Nightfall had learned how to cover clothes and held items in shadow, a trick that Danna hadn’t quite mastered quite yet, so she wasn’t risking things and going unclothed. She’d once told him that the fur almost felt like clothing, so she wasn’t *too* self-conscious standing there with most of the army able to see her bare butt, but her tail was slashing behind her aggressively.

“Is DeVaur ready?”

“Ready and set up like a Midsummer gift. I even put a little bow in his hair,” Kyven noted, which made Toby laugh. “He’ll storm his reserves right into a trap. Outside of that, he’ll be holding to the plan, so we’ll know where the rest of his army is. We do want *them* to win, after all,” he said lightly, then he turned to look back. “Patience?”

“She and the others are bringing the rain,” Danvers replied from atop Strider. Vasha was beside the large Equar, and she had Lucky on her back. Lucky wasn’t going into this as a warrior, he was instead going to escort Danvers everywhere he went and manage the nine talkers Danvers would be carrying, which would probably be safe enough. Lucky had proved that he was good at using the talkers, had a strong clear voice and didn’t get so excited he was hard to understand, and the fact that he spoke Flauren might be useful to Danvers if they overheard something from DeVaur’s men on the talkers. Lightfoot had made sure to get him as far from the battle as possible, and the safest place for him would be with Danvers. Lightfoot and his nannies would be helping the army ambush and destroy DeVaur’s surprise attack, since they couldn’t follow him into Avannar. “It should be here in about fifteen minutes.”

“That’s going to be the universal signal to start the battle,” he relayed. “So we have to start early. We absolutely cannot let any lucky artillery hits destroy those death machines. Does everyone remember the plan?” he asked his friends.

“Ayah, Ah know which ones are mine, and what order tah take ‘em,” Toby replied.

“I know which are mine,” Nightfall answered.

“So do I,” Danna nodded.

“After we take the death machines, go with what’s left in order of priority. Mana bombs, acid throwers, heavy cannons, blackjacks, flame projectors, then take the repellers once they don’t have anything to protect, then start working on the smaller cannons. Be damn careful if you come out of the shadow world, remember that the sieging armies are going to be

bombarding the city. Don't step out right into a mana bomb explosion. That would be bad," he said dryly as he checked one of his pistols for the fifth time. "Is the deployment grid set up, Wilson?"

"Ready. Place the death machines in their assigned places, then drop the rest on the landing grid and we'll deploy them as they appear. We have it roped off so no Arcans wander in there and have something bad happen."

"Then we're all ready," Danna said, cracking her knuckles.

"Let's give it about ten minutes, then get started. That will give us about ten minutes to take the death machines before they start to bombard the city."

"Mo' than enough time," Toby nodded. "Fo' fo' each of us, an' we can take 'em about every other minute."

"Exactly," Kyven nodded as he holstered his pistol, then snapped it. "Your pistols handy, Danna?"

"I can come back and get them any time," she replied. "I just don't want any distractions while we're doing this."

"Good. Don't even leave the shadow world without your guns," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "You're too important to me to take risks."

She gave him a loving smile.

They waited in relative silence for those ten minutes, then they began. All four of them turned into shadow almost in unison, then Nightfall did the honors and brought them into the shadow world. They split up from there, each one taking a single step in a different direction that put them out of sight, and Kyven started his assigned rotation of thefts. They were going after the most critical death machines first, the ones with the greatest use, then going down the list in order of usefulness to both the army and to the coming siege of Atan. The repellers were actually the second most desired item, but they were leaving those for last because those repellers would be

protecting the very siege weapons they'd be stealing. That was their function in the Loreguard's plan, protect their artillery to give them the ability to break up charges on the walls, with the death machines deployed mainly along the shore, since the riverbank of Old Avannar had no wall. That was their primary protection from an amphibious attack, which they'd cover by deploying assets to the riverbank once the siege weapons were stolen. Kyven focused in on the first of his assigned death machines, a massive brute of an evil-looking thing, a ray projection death machine, and he made a snapping motion with both hands. In unison, two converged gateways appeared in the shadow world, both of them barely a foot apart, and he raised his hands in unison. The effect was rather startling to the men manning that machine, as well as getting around the main problem that they had with the shadow world, the fact that nothing could *move* that did not do so with conscious will and intent. Items in the shadow world just hung weightless in space unless moved by another, but Kyven's solution was simple and effective. As the shadow disc moved upwards over the death machine *and* its startled crew, the death machine and its crew were pushed into the *second* gateway, which anchored their material bodies to the material world. That would allow them to move the *gateways* rather than the things using them, since the base of the death machine and the feet, crate bottoms, and asses of the sitting men around the death machines appeared at their destination. That would still put material items in the shadow world, which would in turn attract the *things*, but after the death machines were all moved, Kyven's job would be to scare off the *things* when not stealing siege weapons while the others continued going down the list.

In barely a blink of an eye to the men around the death machine, they'd gone from their entrenched position on the south side of Old Avannar to being surrounded by at least fifty Arcans all with muskets and rifles pointed right at them. The seven men caught up in Kyven's theft gaped around in shock and confusion and a little queasiness, since they'd traveled if only a single second through the shadow world, but even that was enough for the weak-stomached among them. They really had no choice but to surrender.

And so it went, for all four of them. By the vanishing of the fourth death machine, the Loreguard commanders had taken notice, and scrambled to try to protect the others, but the orders actually ended up getting more of their own taken in the black circles and vanished like smoke. The rain moved down the river, and as soon as the rain covered all of Avannar, a mist forming on the river from the cold air, the artillery of the sieging armies opened fire. Cannonballs and mana bombs rained into the city, blowing apart buildings and creating explosions of intense flame, while blackjacks fired their hundreds of caltrop-like projectiles which either killed the men they hit or littered the ground with deadly little objects that always had a spike pointing upwards no matter how they landed, which would make any movement dangerous. Loreguard artillery officers moved to return fire, as others tried to find some way to save the death machines they had left. But all they could do was watch helplessly as those shadowy circles appeared under the machine and everything in its immediate area, then have it and anything around it disappear when the dark magic swept up and over the device, making it, the supplies around it, and whatever hapless men were within the circle as it formed to vanish into thin air.

The Loreguard had never seen anything like it, and that told them more than anything that the Shaman were attacking Avannar along with the rest of Noraam.

Once the death machines were in place, Kyven and the others started working on the other siege weapons. They would steal a weapon and then place it in the designated position, where Arcans would quickly pull it out and move it to where the officers ordered. More and more cannons and alchemical devices vanished in black circles in Avannar while Kyven split his time between stealing artillery and scaring away the *things* by *siezing* all of the very essence of the shadow world around Avannar, forming a solid barrier formed out of the very fabric of shadow that would act like a solid object to the malignant wraiths within the shadow world. They gathered around his barrier, scrabbling at it, trying to find a way through it, but Kyven's strength of will in manipulating the shadow world was too strong for them to overcome, giving the others time and safety to do their jobs. Not

a single one of them took a step out of the shadow world, stayed completely inside it at all times, but as the artillery bombardment of Avannar progressed over an hour, fewer and fewer cannonballs, mana bombs, and blackjack shots went back over the walls in answer. The attacking generals knew that the Shaman were operating in the city to destroy the siege weapons.

Some of the attacking generals saw it happen. They were observing a cannon emplacement on a wall protected by a repeller, and saw the heavy cannons simply *vanish* in a dark shadow, leaving behind terrified Loreguard artillery workers. Then, almost as an afterthought, the repeller protecting the emplacement vanished as well, leaving chaos in its wake.

It took them a little over an hour to strip every siege weapon they wanted out of Avannar, as out in the real world, the fine, misty rain and cool air raised a fog over the river that extended into the city itself. Kyven and the others stepped out of the shadows as Danvers was finalizing the placement of the last weapon, even as they were all prepared to be carted out by teams of mules; all siege weapons were designed to be modular in that they could have wheeled sleds attached to them for transport. Kyven had invaded the armory of the Loreguard in Old Avannar and stolen all the sleds, and Danvers was now explaining to the Arcans how to attach the siege weapons to the sleds so they could be pulled. “That’s the last of them, Wilson,” Kyven reported. “The others are going to stay here, they did what they had to do. They’ll help the army with DeVaur.”

“Alright, Kyven. Danna can take command of the Arcans, and we’ll start our push for the river now that we don’t have to do it under artillery bombardment. What’s your next move?”

Kyven drew both of his pistols. “What I do best, Wilson. Cause chaos,” he replied in a grim tone as he took off both safeties.

Things moved swiftly on several fronts. DeVaur had been ferrying his army over the river on a series of large collapsible boats he’d brought just for that task, and he’d managed to amass nearly 10,000 men on the north

bank in just an hour, proving how efficient the Flaurens were. Hundreds of men joined them every few minutes as the nearly 100 boats moved from bank to bank carrying 30 men at a time, while the Georvans, who had crossed earlier, joined the Flauren advance force. The Baltons and Mallans were staging their infantry for the initial attack, since there was no answering artillery coming over the walls and they'd received reports that the Shaman had eliminated every single Loreguard artillery emplacement. DeVaur ordered Danvers to advance on the Black Keep, and Danvers played along, moving his human cavalry down off the ridge as the cannons of the Arcans opened up on the southwestern corner of Avannar and the Black Keep itself, sending the men holding it diving for cover as whistling cannonballs started pounding into the grounds, walls, bailey, and main building of the island fortress turned prison, which was again being used as the fortress it was designed to be. Danvers' men charged down to the riverbank and started preparing it for what looked like a water crossing as men armed with long Briton rifles opened up on the island, using their superior range to send volley after volley of fire into the Black Keep, where the Loreguard's muskets couldn't reply, not even from the upper floors of the keep. The longest shots landed in the water just at the shore, a good 30 rods from the nearest cavalryman clearing debris and bringing up pontoons. The rifle fire pinned the Loreguard in the Black Keep down and gave them all day, which made the cavalry dawdle just a little in their preparations, or at least seem to do so.

And just when the Loreguard officers and what Loremasters there were left fretted over their position, Kyven attacked.

The Loreguard knew he was there, and they took precautions. The Loreguard generals and the new Councillars of the Loremasters were being kept in an underground bunker underneath Loremaster headquarters, and the entire room was saturated by grounders to prevent the Shaman from attacking them. But, Kyven had no interest in the command structure of the Loreguard, because he *wanted* them to put up resistance, and they wouldn't be able to do that if the Loreguard had no command structure. He instead attacked the northwest gate of Avannar along the road to Mallan, a huge

affair with two massive bronze gates alchemically treated to be light enough to easily be moved by two men on each door and virtually impervious. They were locked into place by huge bars that dropped down from the gatehouse, each bar similarly treated to be unbreakable. The Shaman simply appeared out of thin air behind a formation of infantry, the reserves ready to get up on the wall and respond to any location where the Mallans got ropes and ladders set up to repel invaders. Men fell screaming with every loud blast of a firearm, and the men scrambled around to see the Shaman running at high speed, two pistols pointed at the formation, firing as fast as he could pull the trigger...and there were so many men that he couldn't miss at that range. A dozen and more men fell to the ground as the Shaman sprinted across the back of the formation, then he ran right into a circle of darkness and reappeared on top of the gatehouse, an explosion of black shadowy cloud concealing everything from sight. He rained shots down the battlement on top of the gatehouse, killing the sharpshooters arrayed on the highest part of the wall to take out enemy officers, then the horrified men who had survived his attack on the forces staged in front of the gate watched the four huge metal bars just *vanish*, one by one, as dark circles appeared at the top of them and then went down their length, almost as if the circle were consuming them, going all the way down under the ground where the bars raised from their underground silos to lock in place. The bars vanished one by one as a frenzied officer called for a grounder, but by the time he got a reply, it was too late. The bars were gone, leaving only the locking bars on the gate itself holding the gates closed. A battering ram would not have moved the doors with the four vertical metal poles in place, but the door wouldn't hold with what it had against an alchemical ram. The officer in charge ordered his men to pull down the houses closest to the gate and pile the debris in front of the gate, to shore it up against the attack he knew was coming.

The Shaman then attacked the northeast gate leading to Balton in a similar manner, making the reinforcing bars holding the gates disappear, then his attacks ceased, leaving everyone nervous and wary.

Kyven stepped out of the shadows right beside Danna, who was overseeing the erection of the fortifications to stop the Flauren attack on their flank. He reloaded one of his pistols as she turned to him, relief all over her face. “Thank the Trinity you’re back,” she said.

“For the moment. The Flaurens are about to move,” he replied in a grim voice. “It’s time.”

She gave him a look of compassion. “It has to be done.”

“I know. But that doesn’t mean that I have to like it,” he growled, jamming his pistol back in the holster. “Get the Arcans ready, they might still try to attack you. It’s all going to depend.”

“I will. What will you do after that?”

“Help the others take Avannar. When I’m sure they’ll take the city, I’ll give the signal. That’s when you pull our army out.”

“Did you tell Danvers?”

“You will,” he replied, snapping his holster closed, then taking a deep breath. “Alright, I’m leaving.”

“I’ll be here when it’s over, Kyven. I will always be here for you,” she said in a gentle voice, putting her hand on his cheek. He pressed his hand over her Arcan hand, felt her pads and the very short, thick fur everywhere else press against his cheek, felt the pricks of her claws against his temple. He leaned in and kissed her intimately on the side of her muzzle, then he took a deep, cleansing breath, turned around, and seemingly walked himself out of existence, the shadows seeming to rise up from the ground, from the foggy air, and consume him.

Just the way they did that damned fucking spirit.

“Get Danvers on the talker!” Danna ordered. “Infantry, in position! If Kyven fails, we’ll be neck deep in Flauren soldiers! And get our artillery ready to pull out!” she barked.

Kyven watched from the shadow world as the Flauren reserves formed up and prepared to march. They were set up in a marching formation, since the pathway up the ridge wasn't very wide, and they had two mules pulling the death machine with them, the device about in the middle of the marching column. That was actually a tactically sound place to put it, for the commander of the attacking force would have to decide if he could take the Arcan position before committing all of his troops, and if he made that decision, then the death machine had to be in a position to be used. The deathfog machine's deadly cloud was heavier than air, so he would set it up on the little knoll above the Arcan position that they'd intentionally left empty as a trap and fire it down on the Arcan position.

The position of the death machine in the formation was exactly where Kyven needed it to be.

He stalked along with the formation as it moved, the men almost jovial as they chatted among themselves. They were fully expecting to take the Arcans completely by surprise, and that they wouldn't put up any kind of a fight at all. All of them were talking about what they would do with their share of the booty from selling the Arcans into slavery in a market that was desperately in need of them, thanks to Toby's amazing work.

They had no idea they were about to die.

Kyven waited until the formation moved into a narrow valley where they would pick up the trail that led to the top of the ridge. Toby stalked by as he moved to attack the cannons that the Flaurens would use to soften up the Arcans in preparation for the infantry attack, the officer in constant contact with the artillery crews via a talker, apprising them of his position and estimated time to contact with the Arcan army. Kyven moved with the army as it entered the narrow valley, almost a gorge, waiting until the death machine was where it needed to be, at the top of a little rise in the valley that would put the army lower than it on both sides.

When it was in position, he said a silent prayer to anyone listening to forgive him, then he acted.

The Flaurens never had a chance. Kyven stepped out of the shadows behind a tree up the ridge, then reached out with two tendrils of solid shadow. One of them set the selectors so it would unleash the entire crystal's power in one burst at point blank range, then he did not hesitate to yank the firing lever with the other and quickly step out so as to not get caught in the area of effect.

There was a horrid sound, like a rush of both water and energy, a loud **THWOOOMPH** as the death machine activated. Usually a deathfog machine was set to fire its deathfog at a distance and then spread out at that point, but Kyven had set the machine to activate literally right at the tip of the machine's cylindrical firing chamber...and since the machine was on the high ground compared to the men, the spreading cloud of black death that instantly killed the men tending the machine and the four mules pulling it started spreading and sinking down into the two small depressions in front of and behind the device. Men screamed in terror and fled both up the hill forward and scrambled back up the gentle hill behind, at least until a solid wall of shadow rose up across the entrance of the narrow valley and trapped them inside. The men pounded on the solid shadow in terrified desperation as the black cloud spread. Bushes, grass, and trees withered and blackened instantly at the touch of that lethal black fog, men gave gurgled choking cries as the death energy of the cloud ripped the life out of them, but not instantly, giving them just enough time to feel the pain and know that doom was upon them. Shrieks of terror and agony echoed up the valley walls, reached all the way to both the Flauren and Arcan armies as the cloud of death reached the wall of solid shadow and strangled the life out of the men trying to flee back the way they came, as men died by the windrows further up the valley as men trampled each other, killed each other trying to escape the rapidly advancing black fog of annihilation, trapped in the narrow valley and unable to spread out, only move forward. Trees began to fall to the ground as roots withered and turned brittle, creating a nearly constant thunder of tearing wood and impacts on leaf-strewn forest floor,

rolling sounds as trunks slid down the hillsides, then the fog advanced back towards the last of the Flauren reserves when the solid wall of shadow vanished like it never existed, giving the bottled deathfog another direction to spread.

It took only about three minutes for the fog to start to evaporate, but as it lifted, it left a carpet of dead soldiers littered among the trunks of fallen trees across the bottom of the valley. Only a fraction of the 10,000 men sent to attack the rear of the Arcan formation managed to outrun the rapidly expanding cloud of black death.

When a lieutenant finally managed to get everyone to stop panicking and gather up from the rout, there were only 277 men left of the 10,000 that began. “We’ve been betrayed! The Arcans knew we were coming!” the lieutenant barked, his eyes wild and his breathing fast and shallow. But what orders he might give were silenced when a pink spray erupted from his forehead, and the man tumbled to the ground just as a sharp *crack* of a rifle rumbled over the frightened men.

That broke the men that remained. They scattered in every direction, some going up the hillside, some back down into the death below, some along the sides of the ridge, slipping and stumbling and sliding as men not used to moving on hilly terrain tried to navigate the steep hillside. And in every direction they went except back into the killzone of the death machine, Arcans with rifles were waiting for them.

It barely lasted five minutes. When it was over, as the last of the constant chatter of Briton rifles faded, only 14 men from the ambush force of 10,000 Flauren soldiers managed to run through a hail of rifle fire, trampling on the bodies of their own men as those not so lucky fell left and right, and escaped back down the hill and out of sight of the rifle-wielding marksmen Arcans on the hillsides above.

A lithe canine Arcan stepped out from behind the mossy boulder he’d used as cover and waved a hand in the air. “Collect the weapons and alchemical equipment! Strip the uniforms from the ones killed by the death

machine!” he shouted to the others. “Take everything useful, even the chits in their pockets! Leave nothing for the Flaurens to salvage! Heavy movers, bring the death machine up to the camp! Picket rifles at the valley entrance in case a second wave comes!”

The advance scouts, Lightfoot among them, descended into the narrow valley to carry out their task. Now, the Flaurens knew how the Arcans made war. Now they understood the hornet’s nest they had kicked up.

They had paid for their greed.

Kyven sighed wearily and turned on his talker. “It’s done, Wilson,” he said grimly. “Pull all our forces back to the fortifications while I inform the other generals that DeVaur’s men attacked us, which violates the treaties. I’ll tell them we’ll remain to act as reserves if they need us to take the city, but we will not in any way engage in the battle so long as DeVaur is on the field if we can possibly help it.”

“Do it,” Danvers replied in a brusque, professional tone, as the General did what a General does best. Lead his troops.

DeVaur listened almost incredulously to his command talker as the voice of that damned *fucking* Shaman came over it. There were ten of those talkers linked together, used by the generals of the armies to coordinate, but how that Shaman had gotten one was something DeVaur very much wanted to know.

How did the Arcans repel the attack? They had no defenses set up to protect against an attack from that ridge! His men had a *death machine*, for the Trinity’s sake! If the fight turned against them, they were to activate it and retreat, to eradicate the Arcan army and remove them from the field! How did it go so wrong?

Instead of getting word from his reserves that they had taken the ridge and was routing the Arcans, he instead had to listen to the Shaman inform the other generals that DeVaur’s army had attacked *them*, and as such, they

were pulling out of the battle plan until such time that they could get to the bottom of the attack. DeVaur angrily snapped into the talker “and just how do you know it was a deliberate attack?” he raged at the Shaman. “I told my men to seal off a possible escape route for fleeing Loreguard units!”

“I know you ordered it because I was there when you gave the order, DeVaur,” the Shaman snapped right back. “And there’s also the fact that all your men were carrying Arcan collars. Why would they be carrying Arcan collars while attacking an Arcan army, DeVaur? Trying to line your pockets with the chits you’d earn selling off the Arcans after the battle?”

DeVaur let go of the talk button so he couldn’t be heard and raged for nearly a minute, spewing sulfurous Flauren curses as the other generals demanded corroboration of the Shaman’s claim.

“Just come look at the bodies afterwards, because an Arcan army would for *fucking* sure not be carrying collars with them,” he stated flatly. “And like I said, I was *there* when DeVaur cooked up this little scheme. Forgot I can look like anyone, didn’t you, DeVaur?” he taunted. “I was sitting right there in your tent when you worked out your plan with your officers, so naturally, we were waiting for you. We wiped out your attackers, and even now the Arcans are stripping the dead of absolutely everything they were carrying. They’re even taking your uniforms.”

“That’s a violation of the rules of war!”

“Yes, I guess it is. But after you violated the treaties between Flauren and Haven by attacking *us*, we don’t give a *shit* about your rules,” he retorted. “You tried to ambush us, so we just turned that right back around and ambushed your ambushers. Only fourteen made it out alive, DeVaur, you can have your reserve commander tell you all about it when they make it back to your lines.

“The short of it is this, esteemed Generals,” he continued. “Because we can’t trust DeVaur, we’re not putting a single Arcan in a position where his men can take a shot at us. We’ll hold our position and act as an emergency reserve if you can’t take Avannar without us, but unless you absolutely need

us, we stay out of it. Because, Generals, and I'm being completely honest here, if we engage in this battle, we'll be shooting at anyone in a Loreguard uniform, *and* anyone in a Flauren uniform. Understand?"

"Your warning is understood, Shaman. Hold your position and await orders," the Mallan general replied. "If we need you, we'll let you know. Just please continue shelling Avannar from your position. Your cannons and siege weapons are putting tremendous pressure on the southern sectors of the city."

"It will be done, General Travkiss," the Shaman answered. "We'll continue our bombardment until you order us to stop."

"Trinity damn that cursed monster!" DeVaur raged after the conference broke up. "Get Colonel Grivelle on the talker at once! I want to know what the fucking bloody hell happened!"

While he raged, he also understood the Arcan's intent. They had allowed DeVaur to attack to give them a reason not to engage in the battle! They were going to retreat back to the west *before* anyone else, giving them time to pull their entire army back to the mining village of Atan and dig in.

Trinity damn that fucking Shaman to hell, they had been a step ahead the whole time!

Kyven watched the battle ensue from a high tower on Loremaster Island, his expression neutral, almost blank, but his eyes were stormy.

The shadow walkers had actually sealed the fate of the defenders when they either stole or destroyed most of their defensive artillery. The only means they had to deter or break up attacks on the walls by infantry were muskets, and while that was fairly effective, they were just up against too many attackers. Kyven had engineered this, for this battle to turn into a killing field, and his dark work had borne fruit as the besieging armies of Noraam began their assault on the walled city of Avannar.

After nearly four hours of constant bombardment by cannons and siege weapons to weaken the Loreguard defenders, and after the Shaman-induced rain petered out and the skies turned clear and sunny, DeVaur finally got over his hissy fit and ordered the assault on the walls of Avannar.

Kyven watched from his vantage point as the unlucky divisions ordered to spearhead the attack began to form up behind the lines. Without their siege weapons and cannons, the Loreguard had no way to slow down and break up those formations when they started to charge, all they had were flitters, muskets, and hand-held alchemical weaponry, the most dangerous among them being annihilators.

Or, annihilators dropped from flitters.

He looked up and saw them, what looked like about 50 flitters rising up from Loremaster Island. That was a *lot* of flitters, since they were so hard to make and even harder to pilot without killing one's self. Those 50 flitters were probably the entire complement the Loreguard had. It was their last resort, since flitters couldn't fly very fast, which left them vulnerable to ground fire. But these flitters were rising almost straight up, rising, rising, and rising, and then Kyven understood what they were doing. Someone in the Loreguard had calculated how high they had to be so the annihilators fired as soon as they reached the ground, so the flutter pilots were rising to that specific altitude. But, that wasn't a foolproof thing to do, for while a flutter could fly high enough to get out of musket range, they weren't out of range of cannons and blackjacks. When the artillery crews saw the flitters, they would load their cannons with hundreds of small lead balls, the anti-personnel sweeper shot, then double-charge the cannon to give the shot the range. The blackjacks wouldn't require any special preparation, since they were already designed to launch hundreds of small pieces of metal nearly two thousand rods. Sure enough, in the distance, the blackjack turrets were starting to raise in preparation for firing on the flitters; blackjacks were almost always employed against flitters for that very reason. Much like hunters used a shotgun to hunt birds, blackjacks sprayed an entire area with shot that brought flitters down. The flitters hovered high over the city, awaiting orders to begin their attack, which was truly the act of the

desperate. Flitters were *not* designed to be weapons of war. They would fall like snowflakes if the blackjack crews had range on them, making this attack by the flitters the only option the Loreguard had to try to disrupt the imminent attack on the walls.

Kyven could admire the suicidal bravery of those flitter jockeys.

He watched the attack play out. The 50 or so flitters surged forward at their full speed, which was about twice the speed of a galloping force, and a single cannon fired. That cannon was finding the range. Another cannon fired, then one more, then all the cannons and blackjacks adjusted their trajectory, waited for the flitters to get within about 400 rods of the trenches forming the initial defenses, then they all fired simultaneously. Some had the range, some didn't, so the results were mixed. About 40 of the flitters were ripped apart by the lead balls and black, jack-shaped caltrops—how the blackjack got its name—while the last ten staggered out of that hellstorm of flying metal, some of them damaged, some of the pilots bloody, as pieces of flitters and both bodies and body parts rained down on the field in front of the front lines. Some of their annihilators fired both in the air and when they hit the ground, eradicating anything organic in their area of effect, which disintegrated some of the wooden pieces of the flitters and the bodies of the pilots. Those ten pilots then dropped *dozens* of annihilators on the lines of the Mallans, the ones they felt were the greatest threat, and their altitude and their range was perfect. Annihilators fired just a heartbeat either before or after they hit the ground, and those annihilators did their jobs. Hundreds of soldiers simply vanished in that flash of dull light when the annihilators discharged, an entire company forming up for the attack hit dead center by six different annihilatos and nearly being completely wiped out, as hundreds more died seconds later because only *part* of their bodies were caught in the annihilators' area of effect. Shrieking men without arms or legs or entire sections of their bodies writhed in the blood-soaked grass and bare earth, but all but the luckiest ones bled out and died, ending their agony. Some couple dozen or so men would survive with only the loss of a hand or arm or foot, as medics bound their wounds before they bled to death. The blackjacks ensured that not a single flitter returned

to Avannar, tracking the retreating flying devices and firing again, tearing alchemical flying machines and their riders to pieces.

Kyven understood the strategy. Attacking artillery would do little good now that they'd been shelling the city for hours, so they were trying to reduce the number of soldiers attacking the walls as much as possible. Without artillery of their own, only close-range alchemical weapons, it was their only option, their last resort.

But it was the act of desperate men. The Loreguard generals could do the math, and they knew that Avannar was lost.

As did Danvers. His voice came over Kyven's talker moments later. "I'm ordering the withdrawal, Kyven," he warned. "Are you pulling out with us?"

"I will in a little bit," he answered. "Just get our people out of there, Wilson. I want to make sure they breach the gate. When I see a gate fall, I'll know for sure it's over." He paused a moment. "Make sure you move *fast*, Wilson."

"I know. Mobility is our advantage, and I mean to show the others just what that means. We'll be in Chardon before they can organize to pursue."

"Good. Now, you can do something for me. Something you don't have to tell the others."

"What is that?"

"Reload the deathfog machine," he said in a grim voice.

There was a pause. "I understand. It will be reloaded and left behind."

"Thank you, Wilson," he said calmly.

"DeVaur?"

"Oh no, DeVaur will survive this battle," Kyven chuckled darkly. "I have...*special* plans for him. The deathfog machine is to make sure the

Loreguard lose this battle. If they look like they'll repel the armies, I'll use it."

"Good luck then, Kyven. Rejoin us as soon as you can."

"I will. Spirits be with you, my friend."

Danvers had everything arranged, and Kyven saw it immediately. The Arcans and their human cavalry allies quickly started picking up and moving, and since Danvers and Danna had been preparing them to move out the entire time, they moved with a swiftness that would have impressed any army. Infantry units turned and headed down the backside of the ridge as the stolen artillery and siege weapons were pulled by Arcans, and they moved very, very fast. The Arcans were willing to be mules, and since they were much less stubborn and much faster, the cannons and alchemical siege weapons rolled off the ridge in a pre-planned order, moving very efficiently and very swiftly. Chatter on the many talkers Kyven had told him that the generals took immediate note of the move of Danvers' army, pulling out before they ever put an Arcan within musket range of the Loreguard. The Loreguard generals saw it as a good thing, but the armies of the kingdoms were furious, DeVaur especially.

And the Loreguard capitalized on it, even as the Flauren reserves began to move. DeVaur must have ordered his remainder of his reserves, some 30,000 men, to attack the Arcans as they retreated, for their cavalry and infantry units quickly formed up. The Loreguard sent units south, and to Kyven's surprise, they were carrying an alchemical machine he'd never seen before, twenty men hauling it down the shattered streets, picking their way through the debris littered on the cobblestones from the artillery barrage, pieces of buildings littering the streets. Kyven turned on his perch on the clock tower of the Clockmakers' Guild, almost dead center in the middle of New Avannar, and watched the twenty men haul the device along the waterfront, disappearing behind buildings along their way. They carted the device down to the shore facing Loremaster Island, and over the bridge on the north side that the Loreguard had not demolished. As the Flauren reserves began to move to chase Danvers, those twenty men set that device

down on the broken end of the south bridge, attached it to the broken end, and then activated it. A shimmering plane of magical force extended from the device across the gulf between the two arched ends of the broken bridge, and when it made contact with the far side, Kyven gasped when the stones of the bridge suddenly *erupted up out of the river*, “falling” upwards and snapping into place in a shocking, almost dizzyingly cascade of spraying water and moving stones. The stones rearranged themselves with amazing precision and speed, and in the span of ten heartbeats, the bridge was completely reconstituted.

An amazing device! Kyven had never heard of anything like it before, something that rebuilt something that had been taken apart, restoring it to its original condition! The Loremasters must have dug deep in their stockpile of alchemical devices for that one!

The south bridge off Loremaster island was completely restored, and the twenty men deactivated the device and carried it into the ruins of Old Avannar as horses galloped out from the main headquarters. In the city, soldiers immediately began to pull off the walls, and they all retreated to the south.

Clever, clever, *clever*! The Loreguard was going to surrender Avannar to the attackers and cross the river when the vast majority of their attackers were *on the wrong side*. With DeVaur’s men abandoning their positions to chase the Arcans, it would give the Loreguard army a clear path to retreat to the south.

Very, very smart!

That was exactly what they were going to do. The horses formed up into a cavalry line, men wearing chain jacks rather than the usual Loreguard uniforms, while the rest of the Loreguard pulled back to the south side of the city, moving along pre-planned routes right along the walls to protect from artillery fire. The attacking generals took note of the sudden redeployment of the troops, but nobody had yet to spot the rebuilt bridge

because DeVaur's reserves were marching *away* from the bridge, moving to intercept Danvers and his army.

Brilliant. Danna was a shining example that while the Loreguard were the enemy, they were *very smart*.

Finally, after nearly fifteen minutes, the charge came. Some few very brave Loreguard soldiers who had held their positions fired into that seething mass that attacked every wall at once, with the northern armies on the northwestern side, the Baltons almost due north, with the Georvans and the Flauren to the northeast, east, and southeast...with DeVaur's men occupying the riverbank and capable of executing a fast re-crossing to get the jump on everyone else on the race to Atan. The Loreguard fired their muskets, tossed out explosives and annihilators when the armies got within range, but as soon as the first soldier reached the base of the wall, ropes and grapples in hand, those Loreguard soldiers abandoned their positions, kicked over hundreds of barrels of liquid set in sheltered and strategic positions along the wall, then set fire to the liquid. It was obviously extremely flammable, because it went up almost immediately, sending angry red flames dozens of rods into the sky, like a snake of fire that rose up from the southeastern sector of the wall and slowly encircled the entire city, a ring of fire to slow down the attack. Once the entire top of the wall was aflame from the southeaster river tower to the northwest river tower, the Loreguard soldiers then abandoned the walls and ran like hell for Loremaster Island. The fires did their jobs of all but stalling the attacking armies at the walls, for no sane soldier was going to climb up into an inferno.

Brilliant. Kyven had to find out who was commanding the Loreguard and kidnap that man, for he was far too smart to kill. The general had never intended to hold Avannar, he only intended to force them to commit the vast majority of their forces to the north bank of the Podac River, then retreat to the *south* using their most clever and unexpected alchemical re-assembler device. Absolutely brilliant.

The brilliance further showed itself as the cavalry charged over the bridge, then fanned out up and down the riverbank. Those men swarmed over the Flaurens holding the south bank, then they took over their defensive positions and even some of the cannons the shadow walkers hadn't bothered to take from the Flaurens, then they started shelling the *boats* the Flaurens had carefully tied up or stacked on the north bank. Kyven almost laughed when he saw the first boat shudder and sink, five Flaurens catapulting into the water in a spray of flying wooden splinters. Damn, that was brilliant!

The infantry on the island then sprang into action. They double-timed it over the bridge and into Old Avannar, and quickly set up a defensive picket among the ruins to defend against the Flauren reserves should they turn back around. Carriages and wagons appeared from the stables on the island and careened over the river with another wave of cavalry, the remaining Loremasters making their hasty escape, and the soldiers that had been manning the walls quickly organized and started marching over the north bridge, moving out in ever-increasing numbers. There looked to be some 40,000 or so men in the Loreguard army, more than a match for the Flauren reserves should they try to attack, and Kyven was honestly impressed at how fast and how efficiently they moved.

In a final act, the last of the Loreguard set explosives on *both* bridges before they left, and destroyed them in city-shaking shockwaves of fire, dust, and smoking stone debris, to deny the invading armies a quick way across the river. Those men then mounted on horses that had alchemical horseshoes and galloped south to catch up with the rest of the army with magical speed.

Kyven looked things over, and decided that the battle was all but over. The Flauren reserves were still moving to chase down Danvers, and had not yet turned to attack the Loreguard. The Loreguard soldiers, Loremasters, and what few civilians had remained in New Avannar poured over the bridges and along a path protected by Loreguard infantry using the ruins as fortifications, even as the attacking armies desperately tried to move up their artillery to shell the retreating army. The fires on the walls were still

burning, preventing the infantry from taking the city, and since there were several tons of debris stacked up behind each of the two gates Kyven had sabotaged, which had been Kyven's intent for them to do that so they couldn't easily be opened, that only worked in the Loreguard's favor now. The gates made it all but impossible for even an alchemical ram to knock those gates aside, not when they had to push a few dozen tons of stone rubble and debris to make them move.

Kyven hadn't seen that coming, and as far as he was concerned, that was alright. A Loreguard army that small was no threat to the Arcans, but was a definite threat to whatever kingdom they happened to flee towards. Since the main action was going to be along the Smoke Mountains now, that army running around would force the kingdoms to divert forces to chasing them down, reducing the number of men that would be attacking Arcan positions in the mining villages. It worked in the Arcans' favor for that army to be on the field, so long as they didn't conscript, bring in far-flung garrisons, and build to a dangerous number. He would have to keep tabs on that army, and if it got too big, well, it would have to be dealt with.

After another half hour, it was certain. The Flauren reserves had marched into the forest, stopped, and then turned around to engage the Loreguard, but by then it was too late. The Loreguard moved with amazing coordination and haste as they pulled their entire army across those two bridges, brought out wagons from their headquarters holding supplies and whatever equipment they had left over, and then the entire host of about 45,000 soldiers, civilians, and Loremasters fled right through the ruins of Old Avannar and reached Tobacco Road, heading south. They avoided every trap that had been laid to make the ruins too dangerous for attackers, since they'd set them all, and by the time the cavalry shelling the north bank of the Podac River pulled back, after rolling the cannons into the river, the Flauren reserves were already too late. They rushed back to their old defensive positions, but found the entire Loreguard army already past them, on their way to Riyan. On the north side of the river, the flames finally died out, and the attacking armies scaled the walls and found nothing but traps left behind to challenge them. The entire city was deserted.

Avannar had fallen, but the Loreguard, under the command of one very crafty general, had evaded their attackers and had fled south.

So, technically, it was a victory for the combined armies of the kings of Noraam...but not quite the way they expected.

And almost immediately, the betrayals began. The Mallans didn't even bother trying to enter the city. They were the westernmost army, closest to the mountains, and they pulled back and immediately started preparing to march. A sudden volley of gunfire thundered along the north sector of the wall, and Kyven noted almost smugly that the Baltons, Phioni, and Jenn colonists had opened fire on the Georvans while they were in an unprotected position, decimating their ranks and forcing them to scatter for cover. DeVaur was trying to get his army back across the river, but the rush of their Georvan allies among their ranks as they retreated from the surprise attack from the allied northern kingdoms disrupted his attempts to salvage his crossing boats.

Within ten minutes, it was utter chaos on the north side of Old Avannar. As the last wisps of black smoke wafted up from the walls, clouds of white smoke rose behind them as armies turned on each other in a chaotic melee, alliances were displayed, and other alliances broken. The Georvans took the brunt of it, trapped between the allied north and Flauren allies that would do nothing to support them, while the Mallans gathered up their troops and supplies and artillery and began marching northwest, along the north bank of the Podac River, pulling back to execute a river crossing on the far side of the falls. They would go northwest, cross the river at a safe place some 30 minars upriver, and then march south-southwest to Chardon, Kyven suspected. By the time they got there, however, the Arcans would be in Atan. It would take them nearly three days to reach Chardon, where the Arcans would be back at Atan within four days. DeVaur's plans for a quick withdraw from Avannar and get a good day's head start on everyone else for Atan had been destroyed by that overly clever Loreguard general, for now he was engaged in a pitched battle with the Baltons, Phioni, and Jenns. The Hamm and Menn armies looked to be allied to Mallan from the looks of it, moving along their northern flanks without

gunfire as they too packed up their supplies and artillery as advance infantry marched ahead to ensure their route was clear...and from the looks of it, the Hammish and Mennish weren't heading for Atan, they were heading for *Two River*. That was actually rather clever, for Two River would give them a means to come down the Deep River and get behind the Arcans, come up from the other side of the Smoke Mountains and attack the mining villages from the *west*. It would take them time to get there, but it was a pretty clever strategy. If they timed it right, they could pincer the Arcans between them and wipe them out. And given that the Mallans would have to contend with the Flaurens on the way to Atan, it would give the Hammish and Mennish time to get in position.

So, he was right. It was the allied north against the larger numbers of disjointed south, which had already fractured into the Flaurens against the Georvans against the allied Nurysians and Alamari.

DeVaur wanted to write his name in the book of glory...well, now it was about everyone against *him*, so this was his chance. DeVaur would have no choice but to keep his alliance with the Georvans, if only as additional protection against the organized and allied north.

North against South against Loreguard against Arcans against Alamari and Nurysians. It would truly be an utterly chaotic and nearly insane campaign over the winter, four different armies vying for what few crystals remained within the Smoke Mountains.

But it was the way of humanity, he pondered with a heavy sigh. When there were many hungry mouths and only one loaf of bread, inevitably, there would be fighting over who possessed the bread. Such as it was with the crystals. The Arcans would defend the mountains to prevent the humans from taking the mines, to strangle them off from the crystals and weaken them to the point where they sued for peace, while the humans would fight tooth and nail against both the Arcans and each other to secure what remained of those supplies for themselves.

The Battle of Avannar was over, and if anyone won, it was the Arcans and the Loreguard. The Arcans had managed to get out of the battle without putting a single soldier in jeopardy, while the Loreguard defied all odds and managed to escape their deathtrap. And for that, Kyven would let them go. They *earned* another day of life after that impressive feat. Tomorrow they would be enemies, but today, today, Kyven would toast their ingenuity to Danna and Wilson Danvers when he returned to the army.

Kyven turned and stepped into dark shadows, and was gone. Gone, on his way to pick up the death machine he didn't need to use and return it to the army, rejoin his friends and his lover, and return to Atan to pick up Stalker and begin his grim, somber task.

It was a peaceful and amicable split.

It took the Arcans a little over a day to reach Chardon, and when they arrived, Danvers fulfilled his promise while the rest of the army pitched tents and started cookfires for a short rest and a cooked meal. Every human mercenary was paid, allowed to keep his rifle and his horse, and then was released to his own devices. They were offered spots as sergeants in the army should they wish to remain, but everyone knew that the coming war was not their fight. Of the 3,000 or so cavalry that Danvers had initially employed to build his army, only 64 decided to remain and fight with the Arcans. The men had signed on to smash the Loremasters, and their task was now complete. Though still technically viable, the Loremasters were now a homeless army of vagabonds fleeing towards Riyan. The men collected their pay, shook Danvers' hand, then mounted their horses and either rode due north or southwest, for it was suicide to ride in any other direction.

DeVaur had not taken the betrayal of the Arcans well, if only because Danvers had showed him up in yet another battle. The Flauren reserves and all of DeVaur's cavalry were about a day behind them on a forced march with the main core of DeVaur's army and what was left of the Georvans

marching up behind them, but even men on a forced march were even half as fast as an Arcan army on the move. Danvers had reached Chardon in one day when it would take the Flaurens nearly three, but DeVaur absolutely could not allow Danvers to reach Atan and have five or six days to fortify and prepare, else trying to take Atan would be so bloody that it would barely be worth it.

Kyven couldn't wait to see DeVaur's face when he saw the *two hundred thousand* additional Arcans defending Atan, with similar massive armies holding every mining village and major pass through the Smoke Mountains from Carin to Phioni. Atan had enough Arcan soldiers to match all the combined armies of the north *or* the south, but not both, but the drawback was that nearly half of those soldiers had no real weapons, only farm tools or clubs formed from tree branches. But still, those sheer numbers would make any direct attack on Atan almost impossible, for while the Arcans had no rifles or muskets, if the Flaurens engaged them at the fortifications in hand to hand combat, they had all the weapons they needed.

That was the balancer. DeVaur would have to find some way to take out the Arcan army at range, and Danvers would specifically deploy the army to defeat that tactic by making them untouchable from ranged attacks. Trenches, tunnels, repellers, hardened bunkers, combined with Toby, Nightfall, and Danna there to steal artillery and remove DeVaur's primary ability to damage from a distance, Danvers had sent word back to Atan with maps and orders, and the Arcans there were building them right at the mouth of Atan's Cougar Pass, the inlet into the narrow valley that held Atan through which the Avannar Road went, and that was the only viable way into Atan for a human army.

Everyone else was more or less where he expected them to be. The northern armies were moving along the river, intending to cross well upstream of the falls, in one of the few places where the Podac River could be safely forded by men on foot. DeVaur knew that those armies were moving faster than he expected, and the Flaurens would end up fighting a pitched battle against the northern armies at Chardon. Neither side would have time to dig in, for they would reach Chardon at very nearly the same

time, the Flaurens maybe a few hours ahead of the northern armies. When DeVaur's advance forces reached Chardon, DeVaur would have to make a decision; continue pursuit of Danvers, or have his advance forces prepare fortifications for his main army to use when the northern armies got there. DeVaur wasn't about to just let that army march up behind him, not with the Arcans in *front* of him. That would be suicide. He had a few options that Danvers could see, including leaving a skirmish force at Chardon to slow down the northerners and swinging his army southwest and into the Green Valley, then hook back around and come up at Atan from the southeast. The Green Valley wasn't entirely forest, it was a mixture of grassy pastures and fields with stretches of forest intermixed, caused by the many farmers that inhabited the area, both present and past. A farmer who cleared land for farming and then passed on or moved away left behind cleared land, and it took the forest time to reclaim its former territory. It was viable to move an army up the Green Valley, a fact of which the Alamari and the Nurysians were well aware.

Kyven watched almost impassively from the fringe as the last of the human mercenaries were paid, as the rest of the camp prepared to settle in for a short rest. They would move again at midnight, exploiting the other advantage of the Arcans, the ability to operate at night with no real drawbacks. But Kyven wouldn't be among them. While the rest of the army did its part up and down the Smoke Mountains, Kyven had a different mission, a different task, and as much as he dreaded what he had to do, he wasn't going to drag his feet. The battle was over, and Kyven's part in it was done. He had manipulated the armies to put the Arcans into the best position, put the humans at each other's throats, and balanced it so no one army held any overwhelming advantage. The Nurysians and Alamari had certainly surprised him with their sudden betrayal, but that was a complication he'd deal with later. Vasha nudged him eagerly, for he'd saddled her and that meant that they were going to go somewhere, and he patted her on the snout to calm her a little bit. "Easy, girl, be patient," he told her soothingly. His three nannies lurked nearby, each of them wearing a full pack and carrying both a Briton rifle and one of the pistols they'd made for them, where Striker was still carrying the impact rod that earned him his

name in a holster on his belt, where Ebony and Fastpaw had their claws or raw strength for hand to hand combat. Ebony was tying on the last of Kyven's equipment, then she slid his Briton lever-action rifle into the scabbard on the saddle, the long-barreled one with a scope for long-range shooting. On the other side was his bolt-action short-barreled Briton rifle, a more suitable weapon to use from Equar-back.

He was waiting for Danna to finish with the mercenaries. When she helped pay the last man, she came over to him and gave him a long, wordless embrace, almost clinging to him. "I don't want you to go," she said quietly.

"I know, but it's what has to be done," he replied gently, kissing her on top of her muzzle. "Don't let Danvers walk all over you, love. He may be the more experienced general, but *you* command the Arcan army. Let him guide you, but don't let him supplant you."

"He can have it, love," she snorted. "We're better off if he's the one leading."

"Leading is not commanding, Danna," he told her softly. "Let him lead. He should let you *command*. And learn how to *lead* while he's with you."

"I understand. When are you leaving for Flaur?"

"As soon as I meet with the last member of our group," he replied. "He should nearly be to Atan by now."

"Who is it?"

"Stalker."

She made a face. "That one scares me."

"That's exactly why I need him," Kyven replied grimly. "He's not afraid to do what has to be done."

"So, you're taking three of my Shaman?"

“I’m *taking* nobody but Vasha and the Lupans,” he scoffed. “They’ve made their own choice in this matter, Danna, including understanding the consequences of walking down this path.”

“Lightfoot isn’t going?”

He shook his head. “Much as I enjoy her company and respect her skills, she has a different path ahead of her. Send her and Lucky back to Haven, Danna. Give her the order *personally*, and be direct.”

“Why send her to Haven? She’s a fantastic fighter and one of the best scouts we have!”

“Because she’s pregnant,” he replied. “She might kill Lucky for taking her out of the fighting, but I’d much rather see her be a mother than a soldier. It might mellow her a little,” he said dryly. He turned and gave a loud, shrill whistle.

Danna laughed brightly. “She just might, but she’ll get over it,” she smiled. “If anything, I know how she feels. Even though I hate how it happened, the idea of being pregnant is settling in,” she said, pushing away enough to put a clawed hand on her sleek white-furred stomach.

“And knowing that our children will be Arcan doesn’t bother you?”

“Not as much as it did a month ago,” she replied honestly. “Even if they have fur, they’ll still be *our* children, Kyven. And hopefully soon, we’ll have human ones to play with them,” she said lovingly, looking up at him. “When I have this baby, I can change back.”

“Babies,” he corrected. “You have four.”

“*Four?*” she gasped, then she laughed in surprise. “How am I going to carry *four*?”

“You’ll manage,” he replied with a chuckle. “Besides, Arcan babies are born smaller than human ones, then grow fast. “If you can arrange a wet nurse, you can change back as soon as you recover from the delivery.”

“I know,” she said as Clover, Dancer, and the Lupans approached. His Shaman sisters were carrying their packs, and his two Lupan companions looked spry, almost playful, as they reached him. Danna chuckled and patted Sirra on the head when they arrived, then spluttered and laughed when the pony-sized canine licked her face...and Sirra didn't have to reach her head up very far to do that.

“Are we ready, brother?” Clover asked in a resolute voice.

“As I'll ever be,” Kyven grunted. “Dancer?”

“Ready to go, brother,” she nodded.

“Then there's no reason to dawdle,” he said. He gave Danna one final kiss on the muzzle, then he let go of her and climbed up into Vasha's saddle. “Keep Toby and Nightfall with you as much as you can,” he told Danna as he looked down at her. “Toby's going to hold off returning to his human body for a while, so make sure you three help each other learn more and more about the shadows.”

“We will. Are you going to walk back to see us?”

“When I can,” he replied. “I have to go back to Eusica next week to fulfill my obligations to Andra's parents, so I can pick up the letters they wrote for her. I'll be jumping all over most of Noraam on a nightly basis. I'll keep you up to date on troop movements so you and Wilson can plan for it.”

“We'd appreciate that.”

“Tell Wilson I'll keep in touch,” he said, then without preamble, he pulled on Vasha's reins. The huge Equar turned, then he and his five Arcan companions started down the Atan road to meet Stalker, as well as pick up his critical alchemical device from Virren. It was a long road before him, with twists and turns, darkness and pain, horror and fury, but it was a road that had to be walked. His totem was right, so long ago, that the only way the Arcans would ever be free is if they *took* their freedom, and Kyven was the one that would help them rise up and rebel against their masters. The

device Virren was making for him was going to play a pivotal role in that mission, but in the end, it would come down to the Arcans finding the courage within themselves to reject that lot as slaves and declare to their captors and to the world that they were intelligent, proud, *sentient* beings, and they deserved to be free. They would prove that while they were different from humans, they were not *inferior* to humans. They would embrace the forgotten traditions of their race and seize control of their own destinies.

And to do it, Kyven would help them shatter Noraam.

But it had to be done. To bring balance between the humans and Arcans, the Arcans had to destroy the society in place and everything it represented, for as long as it endured, the Arcans would never be anything but *animals* to them. Civilization as the humans knew it would end, and a new society, a new culture would take its place, fostered in by Andra. It would be a culture of strength and pride, valuing the honest nobility of hard work and prosperity, but also one of kindness. In that society, the Arcans may not be welcome, but their independence and their sentience would be recognized and respected. It may take hundreds of years for the humans to come to allow the Arcans among them again after what Kyven would do to them.

That was the dark path Kyven had to walk. And while he hated it with every fiber of his being, it had to be done. It simply had to be done.

To save the world, Kyven would destroy it. And in so doing, seal his own fate.

But that, too, was his burden, and it was a fate that he had already accepted. That was the path he had chosen to walk, and he would walk it without regret to its destination.

What rose from the ashes of Noraam would be Kyven's little victory.

And thus ends Shadow Walker.

*In the next book,
Walker of the Path,
Kyven wages a war
of destructive fury across
Noraam as the Arcans
struggle to protect Haven
from the fury of the
twelve kingdoms.*