



***WALKER OF
THE PATH***

SPIRIT WALKER 3
BY FEL (JAMES GALLOWAY)

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Chapter 1

Rain.

Cool and cleansing, the steady rain drifted from the cloudy heavens above, casting the morning landscape in a steely light that held no bright or shadow, a murky sameness that crept across the land like the fine mist clinging to the meadow. The light robbed the world of its color, bleeding the greens and browns of the forest and turning them gray, a gray that lightened and darkened and whose lines became indistinct the further things were away, blurred by the fine mist. The slow, steady rain was a shimmering of the trees beyond, the light pattering sound on the grass mixing with the steely light to create a sense of quiet and calm across the meadow and through the forest, the light mist infused with the morning mist to create the strange feel that the air itself was illuminated, creating a light that moved like fog and robbed the world of its shadow. The morning brought a nearly unnatural calm as well, with the only sound being the rain striking the grass and the leaves of the trees beyond the meadow, without a breath of wind. It was the kind of morning that honest men feared for its eerie state, a morning without light or shadow, as if the world were painted the same color with only varying shades of gray. The scene almost made things feel like time had forgotten to march, that they had been thrust into a world where there was no sun, no moon, no day and no night, just an eternal moment of sameness that turned the familiar forests just east of Atan into an alien wilderness whose expanses beyond the edge of the meadow were lost in a mist of mystery.

The man who stood at the edge of the campsite and looked out into that steely morning shared many of the attributes of the eerie morning. His name was Kyven Steelhammer, and he was a Shaman. One of only two human Shaman, a tall man with a sleek frame, limber and long-legged, but his every muscle was lithely defined and was nearly inhumanly conditioned,

giving him a panther-like appearance. He was passingly handsome, what some women would call *rugged*, but the expression on his attractive face made his demeanor seem nearly ominous, threatening. His short-cropped hair was black, as black as pitch, and his eyes were a brilliant, luminous green, that almost seemed to glow in the faint light of the unusual morning.

Kyven was the first of his kind, and the first of what he suspected were many to come. He was a Shaman, a being blessed—or cursed—with the ability to interact with the spirits, and who acted at the behest of those spirits. The Shaman obeyed the spirits as their mentors and guides and sought to do their will in the world. The Shaman did as was necessary where they were needed, and while most of the time their presence was to bring peace and prosperity to those around them, they did sometimes appear to do the work of the damned. To the Arcans, the Shaman were nearly religious figures, bringing the wisdom of the spirits among them, guiding them, and helping them. To the humans, Shaman were the servants of evil, who had sold their souls to the devil in exchange for their dark powers.

That was not an entirely incorrect belief.

As a Shaman, Kyven could enact the power of the spirits and bring it into the material world, to do real *magic*. But Kyven was limited compared to other Shaman because he was a human, and human Shaman seemed to just lack the raw magical power of their Arcan brethren. But, this had never been a real problem for Kyven. He was a *totem* Shaman, a Shaman bound to one particular spirit, and that relationship allowed him to use magic aligned to his spirit without the same limitations that he faced when using other magic. Though he was a weak Shaman when using most magic, when it came to using illusion, the primary aspect of his totem, the other Shaman could not even hope to come close to his capabilities. Kyven only did one thing, but that one thing he did better than anyone else. As a totem Shaman, Kyven was more or less his totem spirit's direct servant, doing her will exclusively, where other Shaman answered to *all* the spirits. Most other Shaman could beseech help from any spirit, but Kyven's pleas for magic could only be answered by his spirit, the spirit of the shadow fox, and he

was *her* Shaman, in her service and bound to her body and soul by threads that could never be broken.

Many called him a monster...and they were right. Many called him a savior...and they were right. Still others called him evil...and they too were right. A Shaman was what the situation demanded him to be, a man who could mete out both kindness and cruelty in equal measure. Shaman did what was needed of them, and if it was needed of them to be a monster, then they would be a monster. They wouldn't like it, doing monstrous things went against the intent of the spirits most of the time, but sometimes it was *necessary*. And a Shaman did what was needed, went where they were needed, were devoted to the ideal of service to the spirits, service to the Arcans, and even service to the humans, though they often had no idea that the Shaman were serving them.

A Shaman could *do* evil without *being* evil, because they were only doing what was necessary. No more, no less. They didn't have to like it, but they would do it.

That was the daunting proposition facing Kyven Steelhammer that morning, the realization that starting today, he would be walking down a path that would have no happy ending. Not for him, not for his three brother and sister Shaman accompanying him, and definitely not for the humans. Today, he and his three companions would join with three other Shaman and begin a campaign that would destroy human society in Noraam. And while he hated that ideal with every fiber of his being, he knew that it *must* be done, and a Shaman did what was needed, no matter how much they despised the action. Kyven in no way relished what he knew was coming. The death, the destruction, the misery. The famine and the pestilence. The crying widows and the wails of the starving children. But it *had* to be done, he believed that in his very soul. The only way to save the Arcans and restore balance to the humans living in Noraam was to completely destroy their civilization and allow them to build a new one on the ruins of the old, a civilization that didn't keep Arcans as slaves.

He knew what it would take. He knew what it would cost him. He knew that he would be remembered as the most hated, reviled, despised, evil person to have ever lived for as long as men whispered his name around tables or in smoky common rooms, but he could accept their hate if it brought peace to Noraam and freed the Arcans from nearly a thousand years of enslavement to people who had no regard for their lives. He knew what would happen to him in the end, but so long as his actions brought about the desired results, he would accept them without complaint.

For him, there would be no happy ending.

Bringing about the complete destruction of an entire civilization would usually require some kind of titanic natural disaster, but lucky for him, the humans of Noraam had created the means by which Kyven would destroy them. Those means were toiling in fields and in houses in most every farm on the continent, in the form of their Arcan slaves. The entire culture and society of Noraam was based on the bondage of the Arcans, where they were treated as little more than animals, and their lives meant *nothing* to most of the people of Noraam. Arcans were slaughtered for their fur, whom stylish ladies in many human cities wore as fashion accessories. Arcans were made to fight other Arcans to the death for the amusement of their human overlords. Arcans toiled in the fields of nearly every farm on Noraam, growing the food, the cotton, and the tobacco that humans consumed. They were used and abused, and when they no longer had any value, they were discarded.

That was what Kyven Steelhammer had been born to change. It was Kyven's grim destiny to bring about the end of slavery on Noraam, and the only way to do it was to completely shatter the entirety of Noraam society. Kyven would free the Arcans from slavery, but at the same time, he'd leave nothing but smoking ruin in his wake, obliterating basic societal needs as he marched across Noraam like a plague of locusts. The humans would never accept the idea that Arcans had the right to be free, so Kyven would destroy every foundation of the society that taught that belief. Once the last of those threads had been cut away, leaving humanity wallowing in ruin and despair, as children died of starvation in the streets, would they be ready to build a

new society where humanity would learn to live without relying on Arcan slaves.

And it would be Andra's job to build that society. She was the other human Shaman, and it was her task to rebuild what Kyven destroyed, to teach the people of Noraam how to be self-reliant, and bring the wisdom of the spirits to the people.

One human Shaman would destroy Noraam, and the other would rebuild it, make it a better place.

He would not carry that burden alone, however. Three other Shaman had decided that Kyven's mission was the proper one, and despite fully understanding the fate that awaited them, they had joined him for this grim task. One was suited for it, but in his opinion, the other two were not...but it wasn't his place to tell another Shaman what to do. That wasn't how it worked among them. Stalker was a huge wolf Arcan with black fur and yellow eyes, every bit as frightening and intimidating as an Arcan could be, and he had a nature that matched his savage appearance. Stalker was not a *nice* Arcan, and held a particular unreasoning hatred for humanity because of their enslavement of his people. Kyven needed a Shaman not afraid to get his hands bloody, and Stalker was the perfect Shaman for that grim task. Dancer was a red fox Arcan who was lithe and willowy, and was an impish and playful Shaman with a bit of a wild streak in her. She was what Kyven would call an *average* Shaman. She wasn't exceptional in any field, she didn't stand out very much compared to her brother and sister Shaman. But she was solid and dependable, and he would welcome her help.

The last of them was the one Shaman he was both happy and unhappy with being here, for she was among his oldest and closest friends. Clover was a coyote Arcan, tall and skinny and attractive to both humans and Arcans on a primal level. She had short-cropped brown hair and luminous amber eyes, and there was a sense about Clover that put almost everyone at ease. She was quiet and calm, but she had a strange charisma about her that made everyone like her, including the spirits, and she used that charisma for maximum effect. She was gentle and wise, compassionate and kind, but like

all Shaman, she was capable of acts of near brutality when the need arose. She was the Shaman that Kyven respected the most, capable of retaining her gentle demeanor despite the wisdom of the Walk teaching her to accept the cruelty that could come in life. If there was any one Shaman he *didn't* want here, it was her...but a part of him was almost humbled that she was willing to throw everything away and share his fate, because she believed in what he was doing. She and Stalker were nearly complete opposites, but despite that, they actually got along very well together.

In a way, having Clover along was going to be a big advantage, because of her gentle demeanor and her persuasiveness. She would be there to soothe terrified Arcans when everything they knew was suddenly shattered.

They were his brother and sister Shaman, but they were by no means the only ones risking all for this. His three nannies were also risking everything by going with him, but try as he might, he couldn't talk them into going to Haven and enjoying their freedom. They were with him to the end...and he feared that was exactly where he was taking them. They were fighting Arcans he liberated from the Pens when he took it out, and all three of them were very, very formidable. The largest and strongest of them was a female, Ebony, a hulking wolf Arcan just as big as Stalker and nearly as strong. While she was large and powerful, what impressed Kyven about her was her mind, not her muscles. Ebony was *very* smart, much smarter than she appeared to be, even smarter than she gave herself credit for. Striker was a male coyote, not much taller than Kyven and lean, nearly scrawny as one would consider a fighting Arcan, but he was highly skilled. He was an excellent shot with a rifle, and for hand to hand combat he preferred to fight with an impact rod rather than his claws, thus earning his name. Despite being smaller and weaker than Ebony and not as fast as Fastpaw, he was just as dangerous as the other two in a fight. Fastpaw was a very tall, lean, athletically built spotted cat Arcan, and his name described everything about him one needed to know. Fastpaw was *blazing* fast, his arms moving like a blur when he fought, able to outrun just about anyone with his incredible running speed, with reflexes just as fast as his hands. He relied

on his speed in battle, and it served him well. They were his nannies, his self-appointed personal bodyguards. While sometimes he chafed at their overprotectiveness, he could admit he'd be lost without them. Ebony kept his camp tightly organized, Striker had taken over Lucky's duties of caring for Vasha, and Fastpaw was a good replacement for Lightfoot for scouting and stealth.

Sirra padded up to him in the rain, sat beside him, and nudged him with her snout, but Dauro was nowhere to be seen...probably off hunting. The two young Lupans were as good as family to him, and they'd traveled together for so long that he almost couldn't imagine them not being there. They had attached themselves to him almost from the first time they met, and he could admit that there were many times since they'd joined him when they were *very* handy to have around, for sheer intimidation if nothing else. More than once, the mere presence of one of the Lupans made people *very* cooperative. That was because of their huge size and fearsome appearance. Lupans were monsters, not natural animals, and the two Lupans were the size of a large pony...and they weren't even fully grown. Both Sirra and Dauro had very dark coats of thick, nearly wiry fur that was also curiously soft at the same time, and their eyes glowed with an amber radiance that betrayed their monster origins. Even if someone did mistake them as impossibly large wolves, the glowing eyes was a stark warning that they were *monsters*, not animals. When fully grown, they two of them be the size of a horse, like the adults in their original pack. Unlike many monsters, they had no magical powers aside from their glowing eyes, but they made up for that with incredible stamina and power, in addition to being far smarter than any normal canine. Lupans could run all day and never get tired, they were agile and powerful, and a Lupan's jaws were strong enough to crush stone.

They were not his pets, they were his *family*. They considered him to be pack, and he had embraced that position. He didn't own them, and over the months they'd traveled together, he'd come to appreciate just how smart those two Lupans were. Their intelligence was an animal one, but that didn't mean that they weren't smarter than some people he'd known. The

two Lupans had the ability to understand abstract concepts, and if there was any indication of intelligence, that was it.

The Lupans considered him to be pack, and him the leader of their unusual little pack, so they traveled with him. And to be honest, he'd feel decidedly *wrong* if they weren't with him, or lurking nearby.

The term *monster* was actually something of a misnomer, in Kyven's opinion. The vast majority of monsters weren't evil or malicious, with a few exceptions like Ursorax and Wolverans. The term *monster* was actually just a term that referred to the creatures native to Noraam that had been changed by the mana crystals over the centuries. Nearly all of them were mutated from normal animals, and most of them had the same general temperament as the animal to which they were related...with some exceptions. Some monsters were gentle, some were quite mild-tempered, but some were highly aggressive, and a few were downright malevolent. Many monsters had magical powers and abilities which they had to fuel by eating mana crystals...and with the crystals running out, many of them would lose those powers. Some few monster species would die out, those who needed mana crystals just to survive, or at least those which were left. Those few species themselves would die out when the last of the crystals were gone. Lupans were one of those monster species that had no magical powers, though their eyes did glow as a visible indication that they were not normal wolves...as if the fact that they were the size of horses wasn't already an indication of that.

Monsters in general never gave Kyven much trouble. He was a unique individual, for he was a human Shaman who had been transformed by his totem into an Arcan, but not an Arcan based on a normal animal. He'd been changed into an Arcan based on a *monster*, a shadow fox, and even though he was changed back into a human, it had changed the very nature of him to make him not *entirely* human. There was still a lingering trace of the shadow fox in him, which gave him unique abilities. He retained the shadow powers of a shadow fox despite being human, and it had also altered the very nature of his being in a way that only monsters could detect. To monsters, his scent and to a lesser degree his presence were *non-*

threatening, even pleasant, which made monsters react to him with curiosity and interest, not aggression. Kyven could approach monsters that would kill anyone else on sight as long as he did it the right way, because his scent put them at ease in a way that not even he entirely understood.

His monster-friendly scent was how he'd lured Vasha, his Equar mount, into traveling with him. Were he human, the Equar herd would have killed and eaten him when he approached them—Equars were horse-like monsters that were omnivorous, as well as being rather bad-tempered and aggressive—but his monster-friendly scent had allowed him to approach the Equars, pick the best of the lot, and lure her away from her herd. Patience had used magic to talk to her, to convince her to come with Kyven and be his mount in exchange for food, care, and attention. Vasha was a typical Equar in that she was absolutely huge compared to a horse, but unlike a horse, she was aggressive and fearless. She was also a bit of a bully and had a mean streak, but that just endeared her to Kyven that much more. Equars were naturally aggressive monsters, but also had a herd mentality, were fiercely protective of those they saw as *one of them*, and were playful... though a monster half again as large as a horse could be a very dangerous playmate when Vasha was feeling frisky. Equars played mean. Equars did everything mean, even sleep.

“Where’s Dauro, girl?” he asked softly, looking down the not-so-great distance between their eyes. When sitting the way she was, Sirra’s head came up to his chest. “He’d better not be causing any trouble. We’re too close to Atan.”

Atan...it wasn’t the Atan he knew. The Atan lurking hazily at the edge of the mist was a place preparing for war, with trenches, fortifications, artillery emplacements, and with hundreds of thousands of Arcans prepared to defend it from the humans that were coming. But then again, Atan was doomed. If it wasn’t doomed because of the impending war, it was doomed because it relied on the crystals produced from the mines, and those crystals were running out. Atan was one of only three areas in the Smoke Mountains that were still producing mana crystals in any viable quantity, and even they were starting to dwindle. Even before Kyven left Atan to start down the

long path of a Shaman, the mines had started to peter out, and the miners were starting to drill prospect shafts looking for signs of other crystal deposits. But there were no more, at least no more that were easily attainable.

The Atan of his youth, the Atan he remembered, it was a symbol of the coming change to Noraam. It was a village built on a dying trade, even if they didn't know it at the time, and one that would have directly affected Kyven had he not become a Shaman. He'd been trained as a crystalcutter, and that meant that his tradeskill and very livelihood would have died out when the last of the crystals had been pulled from the mines. Without crystals to cut, he would have had no work. Without work, the shop would have no income. The shop would have withered away as Kyven used up the shop's cash reserves, then would be forced to release apprentices to save money on feeding and housing them, then he would have been faced with the heartbreaking decision of closing the shop. And that scenario would have played out in every shop that dealt with crystals in the village, from the miners to the crystal brokers to the crystalcutters to the alchemists. Without crystals, the village had no income outside of a few very small farms and a few ranches to the east of the village, just on the edge of the grassy Green Valley. It was a trade village, not a farming village. The village would have slowly died as tradesmen and families moved away to find work or moved down into the valley to start farming just to secure a food source. Atan would be abandoned, and over time, it would have fallen into ruin and reclaimed by the forest to become nothing but a memory.

That was one of his greatest laments in what was coming. As a crystalcutter, he could empathize with the many men in his craft who trained for years in a skill that, in ten years, would mean *nothing*. Today, being a crystalcutter was one of the most prestigious crafts a man could pursue, with only the alchemists having more prestige. It was a demanding occupation that not every man could do because it required both steady hands and the ability to properly assess a crystal to determine the best way to cut it to bring out its full power. A crystalcutter was an important craftsman in any town, his profession brought him respect, and as long as

he was good at his craft, it also brought a very comfortable living. Men who trained for years in the art of crystalcutting would soon be mucking stables and weeding fields, because their craft, and the art behind it, would be useless. Without crystals to cut, there was no need for crystalcutters. The art of crystalcutting was a doomed one, and the men who practiced it, many of which were too old to pursue another craft, would fall hard when there were no longer any crystals to cut.

If not for the grace of his spirit, that would have been his fate.

The craft was doomed no matter that Kyven did, so at least he could find some tiny solace in that *he* wouldn't be the one to destroy it. He'd destroy everything else, but at least the craft he'd all but grown up learning under Master Holm in his shop in Atan, *that* would not be destroyed by Kyven Steelhammer.

Yawning, Clover came out of the tent she was sharing with Dancer, in the act of shrugging on her tattered vest, which allowed him to get a good look at her smallish furry breasts before the vest covered them. Arcans had very different views about many social customs than humans did, one among them being that they didn't consider nudity to be a violation of modesty...Arcans really had no modesty. They may adopt human customs for convenience or simple survival among the slaves, but the society of the free Arcans of Haven was much different from what a human would expect, even as the human would see many similarities. The freed Arcans imitated some aspects of human society, but at their core, the Arcans were as different from humanity as humanity was from horses.

"Good morning, brother. Good morning Sirra," she said in her gentle voice, tracing fond fingertips over Sirra's head. The Lupan wagged her tail and leaned into Clover when she reached them, making the coyote chuckle and push back against her a bit. "You're soaking wet, Sirra!" she protested.

"I think they spent most of the early morning running around," Kyven speculated. Dauro appeared at the edge of camp, and he padded over to the fire and shook off most of the excess water from his fur, causing an angry

gout of steam and hissing to issue from the campfire. The Lupans weren't afraid of fire, another way they were different from wolves. "You ready?"

"Of course I am, brother," she replied. "It won't be the first time I've run halfway across the continent as fast as I could." That was their plan. They had to go all the way to the southern tip of Flaur, a journey of *well* over a thousand minars, and they had to do it *fast*. They would start out today and try to travel fifty minars a day minimum. That pace would kill any horse that dared try it, but Vasha was not a horse, she was an Equar. It was a pace that the Lupans would find only *mildly* exerting, and it was a pace that any Shaman that didn't want to be endlessly teased for the rest of time could maintain without much trouble. Arcans were *far* more mobile than humans because they could run on all fours, and Shaman were some of the most physically fit beings on the entire planet. Using Shaman magic required both strength and stamina, and one way they trained those traits was with exercise. Lots and lots and *lots* of exercise. "I'm surprised you're not going to take us directly to Flaur using your shadow powers."

"Not this time," he replied as he patted Sirra's neck. "Truth be told, we need the travel time to allow things to develop up here. I want DeVaur and the Flaurens fully engaged before we start freeing Arcans, to prevent the King from recalling his army to deal with us."

"He'll eventually do that anyway."

"Yeah, but I want to hold that off as long as possible," he replied. "This may sound a bit cruel, but we need every human army to be wholly committed to uprooting Danna from Atan for our plan to work."

"It's not cruelty, brother, it's planning," Clover told him. "And Danna will do her part by keeping their full attention on *her*." She looked past their small camp, between the mines and the town, and looked at the edge of the village. "She won't hold Atan, though."

"She knows. Eventually the human armies will fight it out, and the winners will come after us. Danna may have more Arcans than they have soldiers, but they have more guns. That's why she and Danvers have a

detailed and pretty damn smart plan of controlled retreats all the way back to the Inner Seas, designed to draw the humans with them, lure them further and further north.”

“Lure them in and trap them in the north for the winter,” Clover said sagely.

Kyven nodded. “Most of the armies have orders to pursue and destroy the Arcans because of the threat they pose. If they let us get away here and now, we might attack them down the line, so they want to make sure of it. Besides, DeVaur isn’t the only one drooling over the idea of capturing half the army and selling them into slavery, so there’s pure greed driving more than one general or king. We’ll use that against them, lure them north and into the wilderness for winter, and let the cold do the damage. They’re not equipped for that the cold, and if they follow the army all the way to the Inner Seas, they’re in no way prepared for *that* kind of cold. Only the Hammish and Mennish will have even an inkling of how to handle it. Danna will pull out of Atan if she has any doubt whatsoever that they can hold it, and I think she’s doing the right thing. The only value Atan holds is the mines. Once we destroy those, them taking Atan will mean almost nothing.”

“Atan does offer a way through the Smoke Mountains.”

“Not for a wagon, and the human armies will need wagon trails for their supply lines,” Kyven answered. “Danna and Danvers will hold Atan as long as they can to whittle down the size of the human armies, then destroy the mines and pull out on *their* terms, not when they get routed. If it’s DeVaur, he’ll pursue even without wagon trains, and Danvers will make him pay for it with every step north.”

There was a sound behind them, and Dancer came around to stand beside him. She was fingering her new necklace, which was the stone that Kyven had used as an example of the power of illusion that she’s carved down to form a circular amulet hanging from her neck by a thin and sturdy leather cord with a foxhead relief on it, not too different from the foxhead

necklace that Kyven wore that linked him magically to Danna...though he couldn't use it anymore because she was pregnant. The amulet gave him the ability to transform into a shadow fox Arcan for short periods of time, literally taking the "Arcan" from Danna, but her pregnancy meant that she couldn't change back and forth between human and Arcan anymore. It posed a threat to the four babies inside her. His spirit had mentioned that she was going to try to change the amulet so Kyven would be able to take the Arcan shape without taking it away from Danna, but like most things involving his spirit, there was no way to tell if she was serious or not. Guile and deceit was the credo of the shadow fox, and it made her absolutely untrustworthy, even for Kyven. *Especially* for Kyven, since she seemed to delight in deceiving him far more than anyone else.

"Morning Dancer," Kyven said, putting his arm around her shoulders. "Sleep well?"

"Too well," she yawned, showing off her very sharp teeth. "When are we leaving?"

"As soon as Stalker wakes up. I wanted everyone to get as much rest as possible before we start out, because none of us will get much for the next year or so."

"A shaman sitting on her butt isn't doing very much to help," Dancer said with a smile. That summed up the mentality of a Shaman. Shaman lived to serve, serve whoever needed them. Shaman went where they were needed and served those who needed them, and as a group, they were probably the most selfless people in the entire world. A Shaman's first and primary duty was to others, not to himself.

"Then we should start getting ready to leave," Stalker called from the tent. The huge wolf Arcan stepped out as they all looked back, unclothed and intimidating. They'd traveled ahead of the army to Atan to pick up Stalker, who had just arrived the evening before.

"Alright then, if we're all awake. Ebony, let's start packing up. Someone show some spine and saddle Vasha, as long as it's not me," he

said playfully as he patted Dancer on the shoulder. “She’s always surly in the morning.”

“She’s surly to *you*, Shaman,” Striker said lightly as he stepped past and headed for the saddle, which was sitting not far from where Vasha was cropping a sapling. Equars could eat almost anything, but were particularly fond of sweet things...and maple trees tasted sweet to them because of the sap, particularly the saplings. Vasha would eat the trunk and strip the bark, but wouldn’t eat the twigs and leaves.

“The day you show up in camp missing a hand, Striker, I’m gonna laugh at how wrong you are,” Kyven retorted.

“You should be running with us, not riding, brother,” Dancer told him. “You get enough grief from other Shaman because of it as it is.”

“I just can’t run as fast as you can, sister,” he told her. “Speed is critical here. I can run all day, but I just can’t keep up with you because you can just plain old run faster than me. So it’s ride Vasha or slow everyone down.”

“Clearly another reason why you should be much more handsome,” Clover prodded.

“You won’t see me with fur on for a long time, sister, now that Danna’s pregnant,” he told her. “Her changing back and forth will harm the babies.”

Ebony started packing up the camp with her usual orderly efficiency as the Shaman packed up their personal effects. Kyven already had most of his things packed, so he took the time to contact Danna and Danvers and give them a status report. The two of them got along very well together, and Danvers was allowing Danna to *command* while Danvers did most of the *planning*. Kyven was quite impressed at how easily Danvers shifted from being the overall commander of forces while out in the world to becoming the second in command under Danna, whom the Arcans accepted as their leader. Danna was learning the art of leading from the charismatic and brilliant human general, and thankfully, Danvers didn’t have such an ego that he chafed at not being the man in charge. Danna may be the face of the

army, but Danvers was most certainly its brain, and quite a formidable brain it was. Wilson Danvers was a *brilliant* tactician whose greatest asset was the ability to think outside the box, to think creatively, take advantage of unusual assets or resources, and surprise the everliving fuck out of every other general when he took the field. Danvers had adapted so well to commanding Arcans that it was like he'd been leading them his entire life. He knew exactly how fast Arcans could go and the advantages they enjoyed, and employed those to maximum effect in the numerous battles they'd fought together. DeVaur may be a good general, but he was nothing compared to Wilson Danvers...and part of the Flauren Field Marshall knew it, which was why DeVaur had such a towering hatred for him. Danvers had outmaneuvered DeVaur since the start of the campaign and proved his superior grasp of strategy and tactics in the battles they'd fought both as allies and as enemies, and DeVaur's ego couldn't tolerate there being a general out there better than him.

If not for Wilson Danvers, this entire thing might have fallen apart, and everyone knew it.

"Morning Kyven," Danna said sweetly over the talker. "You getting ready to go?"

"We're packing up now," he replied. "Stalker got here just a couple of hours before we did last night, so we're about to start for Flaur. I decided to let everyone sleep in, cause we're not getting much sleep from here out. How are things over there?"

"We should be in Atan by late morning, maybe early afternoon," she answered. "We're not that far behind you. Arcan armies move fast, you know."

"That's not a surprise," he replied. "Any pursuit?"

"No, the humans are still fighting it out near Chardon," she answered. "We have a few scouts watching things. The Flaurens and the Mallans got there almost at the same time, and they're still fighting it out. The Flaurens may have numbers, but they were caught in a bad position. Wilson thinks

that the Mallans will pull back once DeVaur moves off a defensive footing. Wilson thinks that DeVaur will have no choice but to pursue the Mallans if they disengage, else they can come up behind them when they march on Atan.”

“DeVaur has orders to get to Atan first and hold it, no matter what it costs,” Kyven reminded her. “Odds are, he’ll just put a skirmish force behind him to slow down the Mallans and march on Atan, and shift his supply lines to come up through the Green Valley rather than from Avannar. He has the numbers to do it. That means you have to be ready for him when he gets there, love. He won’t waste a moment attacking once he gets his army situated.”

“We’ll be waiting for him,” she promised with an evil little catch in her voice. “He still has no idea how many of us there are.”

“Good enough for me,” he said as he watched Striker throw Vasha’s saddle over her back. That move made Dauro get back up and start prowling around the camp, because he knew it meant they were about to move. Vasha didn’t look too happy with the idea of it, taking a few half-hearted nips at Striker as he buckled the straps. The coyote Arcan ignored her for the most part, because she wasn’t actually *trying* to bite him, just showing her annoyance. The one time she had, a swat on her snout had showed her that Striker was much more wary than he looked, and he hit fairly hard. Striker laughed and patted her on the side of her muzzle once he finished, avoiding Vasha’s attempt to knock him down with her foreleg. Vasha *never* made it easy to saddle her, it was one of the many little games she played. At least when it wasn’t serious. She was smart enough to know when her getting saddled fast was important, and when that happened, she was very compliant. “I’ll be moving fast until we get there, love, but I’ll try to check in tonight.”

“You walking back to see me?”

“Not tonight,” he replied. “You can always walk out to *me*, you know. You haven’t mysteriously lost the ability to shadow walk, and you could use

the practice.”

“I’m too busy!”

“And that’s the same excuse I have,” he retorted. “Added to the fact that I’ll be tired.”

“You’ll be spending the whole day sitting on your butt, explain how you’re going to get tired,” Clover challenged, which earned her a swat.

“Set him straight, Clover!” Danna called through the talker, but Clover was already scurrying away with a laugh.

“Anyway, I’ll let you get to it, love, because we’re about ready to go,” Kyven said. “I’ll try to call you again when we stop for lunch, see how things are going.”

“Alright. Be safe out there, love.”

“As safe as I can be,” he promised, then he turned off the talker. *Safe* was a relative term in what they were about to do. About the safest part of it was going to be the journey to Flaur.

Risk...that was something he was used to. For the last year or so, Kyven had been doing missions and assignments so unbelievably dangerous that *only* Kyven could pull them off, thanks to his ability with illusion and his shadow powers. From being a spy in Avannar to destroying the Pens to infiltrating the most secret meetings to scouting out the deployment of enemy forces, Kyven had put himself in great danger nearly from the day he left Haven in the late winter just six months ago...which seemed almost like a lifetime ago. It was hard to believe that only six months had passed since they’d set out from Haven, and that autumn was just a few weeks away. Kyven had certainly been busy in that time. He’d set up as a crystalcutter in Avannar to spy on them, then was captured and nearly tortured to death by the Loremasters. Then he escaped and was sent to assist Danvers, and had spent the last two months running all over Noraam. It was late summer now, almost into September, and already the winter was starting to settle in at Haven. Winter came *very* early that far north.

That was their clock, and part of their overall strategy. If Danvers felt that holding Atan was impossible, then the Arcans had to pull back and get far enough north so the snows didn't bog *them* down, yet get so far north that it trapped the humans that chased them out on the frozen plains.

Six months. It was almost hard to believe that so much had happened in just six months. They'd left Haven in early spring—which was still winter that far north—had settled in at Avannar, discovered what the Loremasters were up to, and had then Kyven had been captured...and that all happened before midsummer. Then came the campaign to Cheston and back up, which had only taken a couple of months. It seemed a lifetime ago, but things had moved so fast, Kyven had been forced to mature both as a person and as a Shaman with so much responsibility placed upon him. It seemed a lifetime ago when he was doing his Walk in Haven as the Arcans, Toby, and Danna fleshed out their scheme to buy as many Arcans as possible. The coming winter was as much a harbinger as Kyven was, the last winter of the old ways, the last year where humanity enslaved and tormented the Arcans. The coming spring would bring change, drastic change, terrible change...but necessary change.

Now Kyven would use the winter himself, staying in the deep south over the winter months as he unleashed his campaign of terror across Flaur and Georvan, sending off the first of the Arcans to Haven in the late winter when they reached the Free Territories, then the rest of them would go to Haven come late summer next year.

Stalker shrugged on his pack, which was built so he could run on all fours without losing anything from it, tying the thongs connecting the two shoulder straps together. "You ready to go, brother?" Stalker asked him.

"In just a second," he replied as he put away the talker in his pack, then advanced over to Vasha and put a foot in the stirrup, hefted himself up so he was standing high enough to reach Vasha's back, and tied it behind his saddle. That was something that Striker would usually do for him, or perhaps Ebony, since Ebony was the one that kept track of all their gear. The saddle was custom-made by the Shaman for the Equar and built on a

riding saddle, not a work saddle. It lacked the saddle horn that most work saddles employed for pulling and towing, and was built up in the center so Kyven could get his legs around Vasha's broad back. It was also quite comfortable for a saddle. Vasha pranced a bit, trying to knock him off, and she gave a mischievous little bray when he kicked her very gently in the ribs. "Stop that," he admonished as she looked back at him with sly eyes.

They finished up the last of the packing, stowing their small tents on Vasha's back behind his pack, then Kyven climbed up into the saddle and took the reins. "Hope you're ready, girl, we're going a long way today," he warned, patting her on the side of the neck, and having to reach a bit to get there. "For that matter, we're going a long way every day until we get there."

"I'm sure she'll only bite off one hand by the time she's tired of it," Clover said lightly as she finished tying the straps of her own pack.

"Long as it's your hand, I don't care," he retorted, which made her laugh. "We ready to go?"

"I'm ready, brother," Dancer called.

"We're ready, Shaman. Fastpaw," Ebony prompted. The spotted cat nodded, then he bounded ahead on all fours to scout, running in the Arcan manner that made him nearly as fast as a horse. He already knew their route, so he wouldn't get lost. Ebony would stay with the Shaman, and Striker would ghost their backtrail from time to time to make sure they weren't overtaken from behind by something hostile.

"Then let's get this overwith," Kyven said with a grunt, pulling on Vasha's reins gently to urge her to follow after the cat Arcan.

The rain let up after a few hours, going from a light drizzle to barely more than a mist, then the clouds broke and sunlight streamed down on them from the heavens as they moved through the open areas of the northern reaches of the Green Valley. Though the vast majority of the eastern marches of Noraam were covered with forest—a squirrel could

travel from the coast of the Angry Sea all the way to the Great Snake River without ever touching the ground—the Green Valley was populated with enough farmers who had cleared the timber for farming plots that it made nearly half the wide, pristine valley grassland and farmland, between active farms and land cleared generations ago by farmers who were no longer here. It took time for the forest to reclaim that land once the farmers either moved on or passed away, and that turned the floor of the Green Valley into a patchwork of grassy meadows and stands of forest., which often served as borders between farming claims There were numerous cart paths and tracks through the woods used by the farmers. Those farmers were mostly a very independent lot that lived on the very edges of civilization to enjoy the freedoms of it, as long as they were willing to accept the risks. It wasn't entirely safe to live in the Green Valley, between the threat of feral Arcans, bears, wolves, monsters, and the notoriously fickle weather in the northern sections of the Free Territories.

They stopped not long after noon by one of the larger streams that wound through the valley, on the edge of a very large grassy meadow filled with nearly thigh-high grass and wild wheat. Kyven estimated that they'd traveled nearly twenty minars already, moving at a fair clip that the Arcans, Vasha, and the Lupans could hold easily. A Shaman could *easily* hold a pace to travel eighty minars a day, and Vasha and the Lupans were even hardier than the Shaman, possessed of a nearly unnatural stamina. The only weak link in their party were the nannies, but so far, they'd held the pace that Kyven set without much trouble. All three of them had been from the Pens, and had traveled with Kyven since he freed them in his long journeys in front of the armies, and as such were in very good shape. But time would tell if they'd be able to hold pace with the Shaman. Sirra and Dauro padded out of the forest a few moments later, the male Lupan carrying a yearling buck around the middle, with only the hapless deer's hooves dragging the ground. Dauro dropped it in front of Vasha, who wasted no time tearing the small carcass apart. The Lupans often hunted for the omnivorous Equar, and she'd come to expect it. "So thoughtful," Kyven chuckled as he patted the Lupan on the flank as he came over and sat beside Kyven.

“They probably already caught theirs,” Clover noted, but Kyven’s attention was pulled to the side. There was a disturbance in the shadows, and that usually meant that one of the others was about to return to the real world from the shadow world. Sure enough, a shadow gateway converged just at the edge of the brook, where overhanging branches from the trees on the far bank cast shadows over the tall grass, and Nightfall stepped through, wrapped in shadows to protect her from the *things* that lurked within the shadow world. The female shadow fox Arcan glanced behind her as she gestured, making the gateway vanish, then the shadow bled out of her fur. She was tall, slender, and in a weird way, very attractive, even to humans. She had black fur with a white belly and ruff, wearing no clothing at all which was her preference, but it was her long, long, nearly sinfully thick and luxurious black hair, straight as straw reaching her the base of her tail, that made people look twice at her. She’d have her hair even longer if not for the fact that it would tangle in her tail. Her face was a cross between a fox and an human, with pronounced cheekbones and a boxy and slightly short muzzle, fox nose, and slightly large, expressive, lucent amber eyes. She was created by the shadow fox to perpetuate the brand new species of shadow fox Arcan, created *from* a shadow fox even as Kyven, Danna, and Toby were created from humans. That didn’t mean all that much, though, because she was as much an Arcan as any other Arcan. The only way she was different was that she was an Arcan of a *monster*, not an *animal*, and that gave her the same powers as the monster from which she originated. Although she began life as a shadow fox, she was highly intelligent, endlessly curious, and was a very capable and dependable young lady. Kyven considered her one of his closest friends, for she was one of the very few that understood the unique aspects of his life. She shared many of them with him.

“Kyven,” she called as she stepped towards them.

“What’s up, Nightfall?” he asked as he helped Striker unpack some of their trail rations.

“We’ve reached Atan,” she answered, brushing her long, straight black hair back over her shoulder, then slashed her tail a few times, which pushed

several locks of that hair over her other shoulder. She never wore clothes, much like his nannies, but most females never really showed off that much without them. Fur covered nearly her entire body, leaving only her nipples and her genitals bare. “Danna asked me to go look at the army, and I thought I’d stop by and tell you before going back. The army is preparing to fight off the humans.”

“What did you see?”

“They’re still fighting at Chardon, but it looks like the Flaurens have the upper hand. I think the Mallans are about to pull back and wait for their allies to get there.”

“DeVaur has numbers against just the Mallans and Baltons,” Kyven grunted.

“Danna has more numbers.”

“And nearly two thirds of them are armed with clubs,” Kyven pointed out. “But that’s not a real issue, Nightfall. The plan isn’t to hold Atan forever. When they feel that getting pushed out is inevitable, Danna and Wilson will execute a controlled retreat and pull back to Deep River.”

She nodded. “I’ve been sitting in during the planning meetings,” she told him. “They decided that trying to keep me out would be impossible,” she said, a bit impishly.

Kyven laughed. “It would be,” he agreed. “Do me a favor and keep me up to date on what’s going on over in Chardon as well as Danna and Wilson. I’ll get better information from you than from Danna, since she’s getting it from you in the first place.”

“I will,” she replied.

“DeVaur’s in a bit of a pickle,” Kyven noted as he sat down by Stalker, and Nightfall stepped up to stand just in front of the four Shaman. “He has orders to take Atan as quickly as possible, but to do so he’ll allow a hostile army to get behind him and theoretically trap him between the Atan

defenses and the forces of the northern alliance. I'm curious to see how he deals with it. He's good...well, this'll show just how good he is."

"Wilson thinks he'll split his forces to hold off the Mallans while the rest of his army takes Atan."

"That's actually not a bad plan," Kyven nodded in agreement. "But I don't think he has any inkling what's waiting for him at Atan," he added with a chuckle. "Oh, and you can do me another favor."

"What?"

"Keep tabs on the Loreguard forces that managed to escape from Avannar," he answered. "You don't need to follow them around and watch everything they do, just keep track of generally where they are and roughly how big their forces are. I'm curious to see what they do."

"Alright," she nodded. "That shouldn't be too hard."

"I'd do it myself, but I'm going to be very busy the next couple of weeks."

"I know. I'll keep an eye on things for you until you're ready to do it for yourself," she promised. Her body shimmered and then turned into a dark silhouette as she took on her shadow form, their defense against the *things* in the shadow world. "I'll be back tonight to tell you what I found." She put her hands out and then raised them, palms towards the sky, and that caused a circular disc of pure shadow to form around her feet and travel up her body. Wherever it passed over her, her body vanished, at one point leaving half of her in the real world and half in the shadow world. When the shadowy disc consumed her all the way to the tips of her ears, it evaporated.

"That is so pretentious," Clover noted lightly. "And she has all of you doing it."

"It does have a certain theatrical style, and half of what I do is theatrics," he answered shamelessly. "Now Danna and Wilson dig in and

prepare for DeVaur. They should have four or five days at *least*, and that should be enough.”

“For Wilson, definitely,” Clover agreed. “We should be halfway to Flaur by then, if half a day’s travel is any indication.”

“We’ll be much further along than halfway,” he replied. “I traveled from Alamar to Atan in ten days, and that’s nearly the same distance. And we’re moving nearly as fast. It’s further to where we’re going than Alamar is, but that’s only an extra two or three days. As long as we don’t get sidetracked or held up, we should be at the southern tip of Flaur in twelve to fourteen days.”

“Then we begin,” Stalker said with a nearly chilling eagerness in his voice...his chance to start killing humans.

“And there will be no turning back,” Kyven warned grimly. “I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again, brother, sisters. If I wake up tomorrow morning and find you not here, I will *not* blame you,” he said intensely. “You do this with me, you share my fate. And it won’t be a good one.”

“No Shaman carries a burden alone, brother,” Dancer told him. “We’ll shoulder this burden with you, because you *need* us.”

“And I appreciate that, sister,” he replied. “But this is no burden I’d wish on *any* of my brother and sister Shaman.”

“This argument was settled days ago, brother,” Clover told him simply. “We know what’s coming, and we know what it means. And we’re prepared for it.”

“We’ll find out,” he said ominously as he bit into a piece of cold bacon.

They pulled in after dark in a small clearing by a stream on a muggy, warm night, then started setting up camp. Kyven consulted the map and deduced how far they’d traveled while Ebony and the boys started erecting tents for the Shaman, who had ranged out to hunt a fresh meal in the

surrounding forest. Given the landmarks Clover described, they'd traveled nearly 80 minars today, and none of them had been particularly tired, not even his nannies. That was a striking and powerful indication of how much of an advantage that Wilson and Danna had with their Arcan army. Where a human army might travel 10 minars a day, an Arcan army not bogged down with wagons or heavy equipment could travel 30, maybe even 40 minars in a single day, depending on how many horses were with them. The horses actually *slowed them down*, because horses couldn't hold the same pace as the average Arcan over the course of a day. Horses had to be walked and rested, but a physically fit Arcan did not...and most Arcans were *extremely* fit. They spent all day every day working, be it toiling in fields or cleaning and cooking. An Arcan army set up for it could move absolutely insane distances, a fact that Danvers and Danna had exploited to get the vast majority of their army to Atan and give them *days* to prepare for the attack from DeVaur. The horses and stragglers came up behind the main force, and the Arcans simply prepared everything else as they waited for those slower resources to catch up.

That was why Vasha was so critical to Kyven and his mission. An Equar could even further and faster than Arcans on the move, because Equars were far more durable than mere horses. Vasha could run all day and not get tired, something a normal horse just couldn't do. They were *extremely* hard to tame, however, due to their highly aggressive and contrary natures. Wilson Danvers had only managed to tame his Equar, Strider, because he got him as a foal and raised him with horses, which had caused Strider to adopt mannerisms of horses. He still had a mean streak and was very aggressive, part of his basic Equar nature, but raising him with horses had at least made him rideable...as long as the rider was Wilson Danvers, Kyven, or Lucky. Strider wouldn't let anyone else ride him.

"How far are we along, Shaman?" Striker asked in his usual calm tone as he and Fastpaw hammered stakes down on the sides of one of the small traveling tents.

"About eighty minars," he answered as he studied the map, then built an image of it in his mind to the smallest detail and beseeched the shadow

fox for her power. She complied, and an illusory copy of the map appeared in midair in front of the three of them. “Here we are right here, just south of Charlotte’s Town. We skirted it to the east about an hour ago,” he told the two fighting Arcans, putting a glowing dot on the illusion with his power. “We’ll be following this road to here, where it merges with this one. Clover’s maps says that there’s an Amish colony there. We might be able to barter some supplies from them, they’re usually willing to trade with travelers as long as they and their beliefs are respected.”

That might be easier for Kyven, because he spoke the ancient language of the Amish, Amishar, and thus could relate to them on a more intimate level. The Amish were an ancient religious sect predating the Great Ancient Civilization whose greatest belief was in non-violence. Kyven had been taught their language, as well as every other language used in Noraam in addition to the ancient root languages of Noravi and Flauren, by his spirit. Amishar, Flauren, Cajar, Mennish, the other languages used on Noraam outside of Noravi, he spoke all of them, in addition to the ancient root languages, English and Spanish, and Andra’s Gaulish tongue which was from Eusica. He needed the ability to speak with virtually anyone in Noraam in order to do his job, and the shadow fox had decided that him being able to speak to Andra’s parents would also be useful. Or, actually more to the point, he had bargained for the ability to speak *all* the languages of Noraam, and at that time, Andra had been a true resident of Noraam, so Gaulish *technically* fell under the bargain they struck.

Guile and deceit...it was practiced even more rampantly between Kyven and his treacherous spirit than anyone else.

“A strange people,” Fastpaw noted as they started working on the second tent.

“They’re not too bad. They’re sure as hell not as timid as people think they are,” Kyven chuckled, remembering Jacob, the elder of the tiny Amish enclave of Henvor, with whom Kyven had spoken at length some time ago. “You should know that, Fastpaw, you were there with me. You guys finish getting the camp set up, and have them save me some dinner,” he told them.

“Are you going out, Shaman?” Ebony asked.

“Yup, there are a few things I need to check up on,” he replied as he dismissed the illusory map, then his body dissolved into a shadowy apparition, a near-illusion of lack of depth where only his outline was discernable in the night. “And there’s someone I need to visit.”

“Just get back soon. You need to sleep!” Ebony declared in a very strong voice.

“I’ll sleep in the saddle tomorrow,” he replied dismissively as he converged a shadow gateway at his feet, then pulled it up his body with a motion of his hands.

Kyven really only had two errands to run tonight, but one of them was fairly important. He took three steps in the shadow world, almost automatically taking note of the location of the nearest *things* to him, which were motionless at the moment, then focused his attention on the shadows around him. The shadow world was a distinct and separate reality from the real world, much like the spirit world, but it intruded into reality in that the shadows cast in the real world showed up in the shadow world. It was an ephemeral quasi-reality that was merely a projection of the real world, a world built of wisps and smoke and shadow, but a world that had its own very specific rules. It also was not a *friendly* world to those who visited it. The denizens of this world, shadowy shapes that Kyven could only call *things*, were hostile to the shadow fox Arcans and Kyven that could enter this place, sought to drain them of their warmth and their life force. Kyven was *prey* in this dangerous place, and his shadow form was his camouflage against his hunters, hiding him from their senses. The existence of non-shadows in this place created distortions in the very fabric of the shadow world, incongruencies that the *things* could detect and could track down like bloodhounds on a trail, the primary means by which they sought to consume the invaders to their domain. But here lately, the *things* had been very passive, had been *afraid* of Kyven, because he had shown them some tricks against which they had no defense. Kyven could control shadow, and since the *things* were made up of shadow, it gave him the ability to control

them, to directly control their bodies to stop them from doing him harm. Ever since he showed them that trick, they'd backed off to study it and him, to find a way around it to get at him without him interfering. That had benefited the other three shadow walkers as well, Danna, Toby, and Nightfall, for they gave them the same wide berth they gave Kyven. It wouldn't last long, however. Though the *things* were very alien to Kyven in what they were and how they thought, they were not stupid. They displayed cunning and a dreadfully effective intelligence, and it was only a matter of time before they felt they had a way around his defenses and would attack him once again.

The shadowy room around him was that of the personal bedchamber of Alak Longwell, king of Carin. And Alak being Alak, Kyven could see that he was currently quite enthusiastically engaged with his fiancée, Sheldra Tremonde...soon to be Sheldra Longwell, Queen of Carin. Sheldra was a Nurysian Cajar, a noble from that swamp-bound city, and that made her strikingly different from most other people. She was nearly as tall as a man, willowy and beautiful, with swarthy, coppery-hued skin and long, straight, luxurious black hair. She had a gorgeous face framed by high cheekbones and a sharp chin, with expressive light hazel eyes. Sheldra was also much more dangerous than she looked, because she had a lot of raw physical strength in that slender yet curvy frame. That strength was currently on display for Kyven's private enjoyment, as she dug her nails into Alak Longwell's back and very nearly drew blood. She was bare-ass naked, on her back in the bed, the soles of her feet pointed at the ceiling, growling and panting and moaning and saying some truly unlady-like and graphically erotic things in the Cajar language as Alak thrust himself into her with uninhibited, gleeful abandon. Sheldra's coppery skin nearly glowed even in the indistinct mirage of the shadow world, her generous breasts with those curious dark, alluring nipples rocking and swaying on her chest as Alak loomed over her, resting on his hands as his sweaty, naked body worked atop her. Given they were above the covers, Kyven could see just about anything he wanted to see. Alak was quite the bandy monarch, Kyven had come to learn. Most every time Kyven came to see him, he was either in bed with a woman or trying to get her in bed. And Kyven could admit, if he

had a woman like Sheldra, he'd be on top of her himself at every available opportunity. She was a *very* sexy woman. Not quite as sexy as Danna, but still pretty damn sexy.

Kyven wasn't in so much of a hurry that he'd barge in on them when they were having such a good time, so he patiently waited for them to finish...and was impressed at how long it took Alak to finish. Props to the man for being so manly. As the two of them lay on top of the elegant covers of the royal bed, Kyven converged a gateway back into the real world and then stepped through it even as he willed it to pass over him, leaning back and all but falling into a chair by the small table not far from the four-poster bed that Alak had in his richly appointed bedroom. A bottle of wine sat on the table—a staple of Alak's—and he poured himself a glass as the two of them panted to recover themselves after their rather strenuous exertion.

As usual, it took Alak and Sheldra a while to notice him, because he never announced himself. It was something of a game for Kyven, to see how long it took. Sometimes Alak sensed him immediately, but whenever Alak's interest was pinned to a pretty girl—more often than not—it took him a while to notice someone else in the room. Alak didn't bark in alarm, but he *did* sit up shockingly fast and whip his head in Kyven's direction. Sheldra looked a bit confused, but when she saw Kyven, she gave a gasp and yanked the covers up and over her waist and hips from the side, covering her pubic hair as best she could given she was laying atop them. She wasn't concerned much at all about allowing Kyven to look at her breasts...but that wasn't unusual for a Cajar.

“Don't you ever knock?” Alak demanded.

“Show me where a door is in the shadow world, and I'll gladly knock on it, Alak,” he replied smoothly. “You've been there, after all.”

He shuddered almost involuntarily. Like most who didn't go there consistently, it was *not* a pleasant place to visit. For those who couldn't take on the shadow form, it was a place with no up or down, where everything shifted and undulated and gyrated in wild, random movements. It induced

nausea in just about everyone who went there the first few times, until they built up something of a resistance to it. Some handled it better than others, however. Clover, Sheldra, and Virren had managed traveling through the shadow world without throwing up when they got out, but they were exceptions rather than the rule. Kyven started pouring another glass of wine as Sheldra used his glance away to dart out of bed and behind a dressing screen, where a dressing robe was draped over the top. She yanked it down, and Kyven couldn't resist watching her attractive silhouette behind the dressing screen, that hid details while showing off her outline, as she shrugged into the robe. She was belting it as she came out, and in that time, Alak had managed to get his knee-length trousers on, lacing them at the waist. It left his athletically trim torso bare, and Kyven was impressed at how much muscle the king of Carin had on him. He clearly worked out quite a bit.

“What brings you by, Kyven?” Alak asked as he stepped over on bare feet, then sat at the closest chair and accepting the offered glass of wine.

“I was on my way somewhere else and you were along the way, Alak, so I decided to drop by and see how things are faring,” he lied artfully. “Judging from what was going on when I arrived, things are faring quite vigorously.”

Sheldra didn't blush. In fact, she gave a sly, flirtatious little smile. She was a Cajar, after all. They had a much more worldly view of things than most Noravi, though they had the same modesty as most other women, at least towards relative strangers and from the waist down. There were bath houses in Nurys where people could bathe, and in those places of business, it was considered socially acceptable to disrobe in front of strangers. That in itself might not be seen as *too* outrageous to most other people of Noraam until one realized that Nurysian bath houses were not gender segregated. Men and women bathed in the same room, though not in the same bathing tubs and pools, and would be nude in sight of the other gender. And that was allowed so long as it was within the confines of the bath house and there were workers present to ensure that nothing scandalous might happen between a man and a woman. In that very narrow instance, it was socially

acceptable for a man and a woman who didn't know each other to be naked while in company. In addition, in many Cajar households, the women went about topless within the confines of their own homes. Nurys was a *very* hot place, after all, and even women needed the kind of relief that only stripping down to the bare essentials could provide during the sweltering summer months. For that reason, it had become acceptable for a Nurysian lady to go about topless inside her own home, even if she was entertaining guests...though usually only the Cajar ladies actually practiced this custom. Outside the home, it was not against Nurysian law for a woman to expose her breasts, though most Nurysian women did wear shirts or bodices. Cajar women visiting from the small hamlets out in the swamps, however, *did* go about without tops when they visited the city, adhering to Cajar custom that said it was acceptable for a woman to expose her breasts. Not everyone in Nurys was a Cajar, after all, and the custom had its roots in Cajar culture and society. A woman showing her breasts wasn't quite so scandalous as showing pubic hair, genitals, or their bare backside, which a Cajar of either sex would not do except in a bath house or in private and intimate company. That was much more in line with Noravi moral values, at least if one discounted the social acceptance of baring ones' self to strangers of the opposite gender in a bath house.

Cajar society was considered very decadent to outsiders, and their much different view of nudity when it came to a lady's breasts was one of the main reasons for it.

"Well, the ceremony was set for the first of January," he related. "I'm sure you'll find a way to crash it."

Kyven laughed. "I just might, but I promise not to cause a scene. Odds are, you'll never know I was there," he replied easily as he offered the final glass of wine to Sheldra. "But, I do have some information to pass along," he added as he picked up the glass he'd poured for himself. "As I'm sure you've heard, Avannar is gone, and right now, most of the armies of Noraam are fighting each other to the west of where Avannar used to be."

Alak nodded grimly. “I’ve managed to pull my own men out of that hellhole,” he relayed. “When the Loreguard crumbled in Riyan, I got word to my officers to split our men off from the Loreguard soldiers. They managed it, and the Loreguard didn’t bother to pursue.”

“Well, you’d better get them ready,” Kyven warned. “The Loreguard managed to get about forty thousand soldiers out of Avannar, and they’re moving south. I’m not sure where they’re going, but it’s fairly clear that they intend to either come to Carin or go through Carin on their way somewhere else. They might be hostile to your people, Alak. I doubt they’re going to pay for anything they take as they move south, and they might try to annex one of your towns. When I know more about what they have in mind, I’ll pass it along, but I did want you to know they were coming.”

“I’ve gotten word of them from my advance scouts,” he nodded. “I’ll be ready for them when they get here.”

“Good,” he said, taking a sip of Alak’s most excellent wine. “Now, I have to ask. Have you given any thought to my proposal?”

“Actually, I have. Quite a bit,” he replied seriously, then took a long draw from his glass. “And while I think it’s a good idea, I’m honestly not sure how I can implement it in the short term without losing my throne or losing my head. But there is *something* I can do. I’m going to put out an edict that any Arcan in a kennel or officially for sale will be automatically be bought by the crown, and I’ll offer to buy Arcans off the plantations and out of households even over the going price right now, a price so high they’ll be motivated to sell out of pure greed. I’ll tell them that I have such a need for Arcans that I’m willing to pay outrageous prices for them... which isn’t far from the truth, since it’s almost impossible to find an Arcan for sale anywhere right now. I’ll more or less empty out my treasury of chits buying Arcans from the plantations, then you pay me for them in crystals, not in gold. You said you could pay in crystals, and those have more worth than gold right now. I can always buy gold later with crystals if I need to. I doubt I can get barely more than a quarter of the Arcans in Carin that way, but it’s a start.”

“That’s perfectly acceptable,” Kyven said immediately. “We’ll have to work out a value for each Arcan, but I can set it up. You give us the Arcans, we pay you in uncut crystals for them. When you run out of chits in your treasury, I think we can find a way to finance the operation so long as you’ve still got Arcans to buy for us. The Arcans are also sitting on a large number of chits that they can funnel to you for you to pay out for the Arcans. And pretty sneaky, Alak. You’re impoverishing anyone that might threaten you down the line once chits more or less become worthless, and we roll through and free the Arcans. The richest and greediest plantation owners will be the ones that pose the greatest threat to you when things go to hell, and you’re cutting their legs out from under them.”

Sheldra laughed. “You see ze heart of ze matter, *mon avor*,” she said with a nod, losing a bit of the polish off her Noravi and regressing to a more Cajar accent. “*We* will have crystals and their value, while those that would decry Alak, zey will have nothing.”

“You’re damn clever, that’s why I think I like you so much, Alak,” Kyven said grandly, toasting Alak with clinking glasses. “Now, that’s the business, so how about the pleasure?” he asked, which made the corner of Sheldra’s mouth curl upwards, almost smugly. “What’s been going on in Carin that’s not all doom and gloom? I could use some good news about now.”

For nearly an hour, Kyven, Alak, and Sheldra just sat at the table and more or less gossiped. They told him all about the latest shenanigans going on in Alak’s court, and he also picked up quite a bit of useful information about the maneuverings and political machinations of the plantation owners, who as a group were extremely rich and extremely powerful. They were the main force with which Alak had to content, because as a group, they could and had in the past imposed their will on the king of Carin for their own benefit...which more than once in the past had been to the detriment of the country as a whole. Carin losing some of its territory to Georvan just after South Carin lost the war with them was one of those examples. What was then North Carin lost nearly a tenth of its land to Georvan, who annexed beyond South Carin’s borders when the largest landowners of the southern

tracts were wooed into supporting being annexed by Georvan with promises of tax breaks and cash kickbacks.

They'd nearly finished the bottle of wine as Sheldra talked about the upcoming wedding, when a shift in the *texture* of the shadows around him caught his attention. It was something he'd never felt before, as if the shadow world's boundaries were shifting, and trying to intrude into the material world. Alak and Sheldra gave him a strange look when he stood up suddenly and looked at one of the walls, but his eyes weren't paying attention to the mundane world, they were instead watching the shadows, which were...*shimmering*. There was no other way to describe it. It was almost like a rain curtain passing over the area, and when Kyven was inside it, the shadows turned, turned *colder*, and became even more ominous than usual.

It was...hard to describe. It was like what he was seeing was a shadow of something in the shadow world, and the shadow it cast was what he was seeing...like some giant bird flying over a squirrel, whose shadow blocked out the sun. Though the squirrel couldn't see the bird, the bird's shadow cast it in darkness, and the wise squirrel knew that a sudden shadow blocking out the sun was a signal of danger. The shift in the texture of the shadows was *malevolent*, and it chilled his soul to feel those shadows creep across his skin.

"Kyven? Are you well, *mon avor*?" Sheldra asked in sincere concern.

"I...more or less," he replied hesitantly. "Something just passed over us. Something I've never felt before."

"One of your Shaman friends?" Alak asked.

"No, this didn't come from the spirits. This came from the shadow world," he answered absently, his eyes scanning the room. "Something *unfriendly*."

"You once said that there are enemies within that place," Sheldra said.

“This wasn’t them, this was something else,” he replied, looking up at the ceiling, studying the shimmering shadows, which were slowly returning to normal. “I know what the *things* feel like, and when they’re close. Whatever this is, it’s new. Or at least something that that’s never crossed paths with me before. The shadow world is a big place, and I don’t know everything about it. Truth be told, I don’t know much about it at all,” he admitted. “I hate to be rude, friends, but I’d better to take a look at things. If there’s something new in there that wants to eat my eyeballs, I’d rather hunt it down and find out exactly what I’m dealing with. I sure as fuck don’t want it sneaking up on me someday when my attention is on something else.” His body shimmered, then dark shadow coated him, infused him as he assumed his shadow form, transforming his entire body into living shadow as his form lost depth and became a shadow cast into empty air, an outline, a silhouette that one might think would disappear if it turned sideways. “I’ll take your plan to the people who can get it started on our side, Alak. I’ll get in touch with you in a few days so we can arrange where our people can bring your crystals and pick up the Arcans. Preferably someplace nobody’s gonna see it, like Foggy Peak, or maybe even the forest just south of Brackenveld. It might behoove both of us for the exchange to happen *outside* of Carin’s boundaries.”

“That might be a good idea,” he nodded. “There’s a road straight to Brackenveld from Foggy Peak.”

Kyven took a step back, then pointed his palms at the floor, causing a disc of inky blackness to form under his feet. “I’ll see you two later,” he said, then started raising his hands, turning his palms upwards as his hands came up. “Be good,” he added when the disc was at his waist, then his view of Alak and Sheldra shifted when he entered the shadow world, taking on that hazy, indistinct appearance that came with viewing objects in the real world from the shadow world. He stayed motionless for a moment, assessing his surroundings, then he started casting about for that...shadow. A shadow within the shadow world, something that he knew he should be able to sense as a *disharmony* in this place. Whatever it was, though, it wasn’t something from the real world affecting the shadow world, twisting

it and altering it as Kyven did, this was something else. But the effect it had on the shadow world was similar, and that should attract the *things*.

Curious. All the *things* he could sense were moving *away* from his position, and they were moving as fast as they could go.

They feared whatever cast that shadow.

That was fairly important information. He started off in the direction he'd felt the shadow pass, trying to find it by following along behind it, moving vast distances in a short time in the scope of the real world...but the shadow world was not constrained by the dimensions of the real world. He paused and knelt as he felt the direction that the shadow had gone and how it traveled *away* from the real world, going in a direction he had never considered before.

It opened his eyes to something he had never considered before. Always before, Kyven had stayed within the reference of the real world, walking along the border between the real and the shadow...almost like walking along the surf of a beach. He could easily walk up onto the sand and out of the water, which was entering the real world, but he could *also* wade into the deeper water, and eventually begin to swim, entering the deeper, darker expanses of the shadow world, that part of it that did *not* abut the real world.

This he considered with all due caution, because he realized as he thought about it that the *things* did *not* move into the deeper areas of the shadow world. They stayed along that "border," staying in the part of the shadow world that interacted with the real world. That meant that either there was no reason for them to venture into the deeper shadows, or that there *was* a reason they didn't venture into the deeper shadows. And their reaction to whatever had cast that shadow hinted to him that it was the latter reason that the *things* stayed within the part of the shadow world that was tied to the real world. Whatever that thing was, the *things* feared it. They feared it greatly. And if they were afraid of it, Kyven had better have the sense to imitate them in that regard. After all, they had the experience here.

The shadow fox had once told him that the shadow world held greater secrets than he could ever imagine...and he had no reason to doubt her now. Just when he felt he was starting to understand this realm, to master it, something happens to show him that he barely knew anything at all about this place.

And the key to his survival in the shadow world was to understand those secrets.

This was hostile territory for him and for the others, where they were the prey, not the predators...and now he knew that the *things* weren't the only things in here he should be worrying about.

He decided against venturing deeper into the shadow world, at least for now. He had the impression that whatever that was, it had returned back into the deeper areas of the shadow world, so deeply that it no longer cast its "shadow" over this part of it, which was why he'd never sensed it before. Whatever it was, it might have the ability to sense him deeper in the shadow world, and since he had no idea of what awaited him deeper in that unknown ocean, he'd better not offer himself up as bait to the fish lurking under the surface of that dark, mysterious water. He'd wait a while, allow whatever that was to move along, then he'd start investigating those deeper parts of the shadow world, slowly and carefully, to try to get an idea of just what he might be dealing with, with the ultimate goal of finding out whatever that thing was and determine how much of a danger it posed to him and to the others.

There was one thing he knew he had to do, though. He took six steps and returned to Atan, then converged a gateway back into the real world. He stepped into it even as he willed it to pass over him, and he stepped out of a circle of darkness and into a large campfire area in the mining area just outside the village. Danna, Wilson, Toby, and Nightfall were all there, along with several of Wilson's lieutenants and several Shaman, Patience being the one he knew best. "Kyven!" Danna said happily, jumping up and throwing herself into his arms, then she licked him on the cheek. "I thought you said you weren't going to come back tonight."

“I wasn’t planning on it, but I had to,” he said seriously. “I’m bringing you a warning, love.”

“Over what, Kyv?” Danvers asked, standing up and all his attention fixed on him.

“Nothing military, Wilson,” he replied. “This is for the shadow walkers.”

“What kind o’ warnin’, Kyv?” Toby asked, scratching a bit at the side of his muzzle. Kyven was again a bit surprised that Toby had agreed to stay a shadow fox Arcan for a bit longer despite having the option of changing back, but in that form, he had several advantages that would serve him well in the battles to come. He was stronger than he was as a human, faster, able to run as fast as a horse by running on all fours, and could see in the dark as well as his human eyes could see in broad daylight. That was the main reason that most of Danvers’ plans hinged on his Arcan troops making night attacks, where their ability to see even in the darkest, cloudiest, moonless night as well as a human could see at noon on a cloudless summer day gave them a tremendous tactical and strategic advantage. It was hard to kill what one could not see, and that let the Arcans get close enough to employ their other advantages, their raw strength, agility, and natural weaponry, as well as getting the troops in range to use alchemical weapons and the Shaman among them in close enough to employ their magic. In a hand to hand fight, a human would lose to an Arcan the vast majority of the time unless he was armed with something like an impact rod...though some humans were more than a match for an Arcan when fighting toe to toe no matter what weapon he used.

One such human was Toby Fisher. Even *Lightfoot* respected Toby’s fighting prowess, and praise like that...there wasn’t much better.

Kyven brought Danna over to the others and knelt down. “A bit ago, I came across something new in the shadow world,” he began. “Well, I wasn’t *in* the shadow world, but whatever it was had such a presence that I felt it even in the real world. And whatever it is, the *things* are deathly

afraid of it,” he said grimly. “They scattered out of its path like deer running from a Wolveran.”

“Ayah, that ain’t a good sign,” Toby grunted.

“Yeah,” he agreed with a nod. “I can’t tell you what it is, but what I *can* tell you is that it has such a presence that it alters the very nature of the shadows when it’s close by, and you can feel it all the way into the real world. That’s how I sensed it. It was almost like it cast a shadow over the shadows, and trust me, it wasn’t a friendly feeling. I also think it came from *deeper* in the shadow world. You know, that part of it beyond where the real world projects into the shadow world.”

“That is a place we fear, Kyven,” Nightfall told him seriously.

“And that’s something all three of you better keep to heart,” he said soberly, looking at three pairs of Arcan eyes. “And if you ever feel that, that whatever it is, you get out of the shadow world *immediately*, no matter where you are, and stay out until you’re absolutely sure that it’s long gone. Do *not* hang your ass out where it can take a snap at it.”

“How will we know it’s nearby?” Danna asked.

“Trust me, you’ll *know*,” he said with a bit of a shiver. “If anything, watch the *things*. If they suddenly scatter, then get out. They can sense things we can’t, so let them be your guide. If they run, *you* run.”

“I’d say that’s good advice,” Danvers said sagely from the side.

“We could ask *her* what it was,” Danna nearly spat.

“You know she won’t tell us,” Kyven said. “That’s not how she does things, Danna.”

“Well she should. I thought we were important to her, you know, because of this,” she said, patting her belly.

Kyven almost laughed. “Even you know how ridiculous that statement is, love,” he said with a bitter tone. “She doesn’t save us from ourselves. If

she decides what you did was stupid, she won't lift a paw to help you. She'll sit there and watch you die."

"Survival of the fittest," Toby grunted.

Kyven nodded. "So don't be stupid," he told the three of them. "If you shadow walk, pay even more attention than usual, and be ready to get out immediately at all times. Always have a shadow gateway a split second from forming back into the real world until I found out what that thing was and if it poses a long-term threat."

"You just told us not to do anything stupid, and you're talking about chasing it down!" Danna protested.

"*Someone* has to find out, and look me in the eyes and tell me someone else here has more experience in the shadow world than me," he challenged.

She glared a bit, but said nothing.

"Alright then. I'd better get back, I do need to get some rest. We managed to go nearly eighty minars today, and tomorrow I'm aiming for a hundred."

"I'm keeping an eye on the Loreguard for you, Kyven, and also the Alamari and Nurysians. You might run into them tomorrow, or at least cross their supply lines," Nightfall told him.

"Ayah, and I'm keepin' an eye on DeVaur and the northern armies," Toby added. "They's about ready to march on Atan."

"And we'll be ready for them," Danvers declared. "We should have all our fortifications finished by the morning after next, and we're getting steady shipments of muskets and rifles in from Haven now. I think we'll be able to hold this position well into winter," he predicted. "So long as the different kingdoms don't all put aside their differences and join together to fight us, anyway."

"That reminds me. Patience," he said, looking over at her. "I was talking to King Alak Longwell before this happened, and he's agreed to my

proposal, or at least a portion of it. He'll buy the Arcans in his territory for chits, then we buy them from *him* with crystals."

"That's wonderful news!" she said brightly.

"Yeah, he saw things my way," Kyven chuckled. "Get a message back to Haven and tell them about it, and have them scrape up every chit they can find and get them here as fast as possible. They've already got shipments of crystals coming for us, so we can use those to pay Alak for now, but we *need* those chits. Alak will run out of chits long before he runs out of Arcans given the prices he'll have to pay to get them away from their owners, and we may as well get some use out of the chits we have before they become worthless."

"I'll take care of it, brother," she assured him. "I'll have our brothers and sisters here make as many crystals as they can in their spare time, but they can't exhaust themselves."

"We can also make chits right here," Hardstep declared. "Quite a few of us are fairly good at chit counterfeiting," he added with a chuckle. "I can make chits that even the master chit makers among the Loremasters couldn't tell from the real ones. All I need are a few basic materials I shouldn't have any problems finding in the village."

"Then counterfeit to your heart's content, brother," he said with a smile. "Alak wants to arrange to trade off the Arcans for crystals outside of Carin territory. I suggested Brackenveld, and he thinks it's a good idea. If his nobles and the richer plantation owners find out what he's doing before things develop, they'll lynch him. They'll only see what he was doing as clever and visionary *after* I move out into the open."

"I'll get a message to our forces in Brackenveld and warn them of the plans, so they can start preparing," Danvers said.

"Good idea," Kyven agreed. "If DeVaur's troops don't catch up to the Alamari and Nurysians and they attack Brackenveld, we might have to move the meeting point south, somewhere along the Lonely Road. That's

the road from Foggy Peak to Brackenveld, and it bypasses the path the Alamari and Nurysians are taking, coming up a long narrow valley within the Smoke Mountains. So at least in that regard, Alak's operation won't get exposed by the humans."

"I know where you're talking about," Hardstep nodded. "It's a good idea. That road is isolated and lonely, with almost no settlers. Its only real use is for bringing crystals out of the Brackenveld mines down into Carin through Foggy Peak."

"That's how it got its name, brother," Kyven chuckled. "Because there's virtually nothing out there but trees, hills, and wildlife. Anyway, I'd better get back to camp and get some rest, or Ebony will spank me," he said, which made a few of them laugh. He kissed Danna on the side of her muzzle, then let go of her and stood up. "I'll see you when I can, but until then, guys, remember to be *careful*," he said, looking at the three other shadow walkers.

"We will, Kyv, Ah promise," Toby answered.

Instead of converging a typical gateway, he opted instead to do it the way his spirit did. The shadows began to coalesce around him as he turned and walked away, until to them, he was lost in the shifting darkness beyond the campfire. That was the moment when the shadows carried him into the shadow world, but he did *not* take on his shadow form. He wanted to see what the *things* did if they sensed one of them so soon after that other thing had passed by. Without his shadow form, the shadow world returned to the roiling, chaotic landscape he'd come to know before learning that secret, where everything he saw undulated and twisted and moved, which induced vertigo and nausea in just about anyone that wasn't accustomed to it. His eyes were able to pick through the distortion, a skill he'd learned through practice, able to pierce the chaotic veil and see beyond it. He took three steps, traversing eighty minars with them, but the *things* didn't automatically react to his dramatic alteration of the shadow world. He had the feeling that they were still a little spooked from that little visitation... and that in itself was important information to know.

He remembered what it felt like. He...he was fairly sure that he could *duplicate* what that thing did to the shadow world when it passed over him. If the *things* were afraid of the imprint that other thing left on the shadow world, he could recreate that effect to scare them off, if it came down to needing it.

Guile and deceit. It applied in the shadow world just as much as in the real world.

He converged a gateway back into the real world and stepped through it even as he willed it to pass over him, then emerged from the shadows at the edge of their camp. Sirra stood up suddenly and bounded over to him like a happy puppy, almost bouncing around him. He had to laugh as he patted her side fondly, then spluttered when her frying pan-sized tongue grated over the vast majority of his face. "Shaman, did you get everything done?" Ebony asked.

"More or less, but as usual, I got sidetracked a little bit," he said as the others looked in his direction.

"So you're going to get some rest tonight?" she asked in a slightly threatening tone.

He laughed. "Yes, mommy, I'm going to get some sleep tonight," he replied flippantly. "But I shouldn't. I came across something new while I was out, and it wasn't something I think was very friendly."

"What is that, brother?" Stalker asked.

"Something in the shadow world," he said. He sat down by the fire next to Clover and told them about his talk with Alak, the agreement they made, and then the appearance and disappearance of whatever it was that had cast its shadow over the shadow world. "Whatever it was, it did *not* feel friendly," he grunted. "Even the imprint it left on the shadow world felt *malevolent*. The *things* in there scattered like deer when it appeared, and if they're afraid of it, it's just common sense for us to be afraid of it too. If that was just what its *shadow* did, I'd hate to meet it face to face. But I

might have to. I have to find out what it is and find out if it's a threat to the others," he said grimly.

"I don't think I have to tell you to be careful, brother," Dancer told him.

He glanced at her before tossing a twig into the fire. "Yes, sister, that goes without saying. I'm not going to stalk a bear wearing pots and pans around my ankles," he told them. "But since this is the first time I've ever encountered it, I get the feeling that it doesn't come this close to the real world very often. But if it does do it again, I want to know more about it so I know how to stay out of its way and make sure the others do to. My spirit told me long ago that the key to surviving in the shadow world was to know its secrets. Well, this is one of its secrets, and I'm going to learn it, if only so I'm aware of what dangers it may pose."

"On the other hand, it's good that Carin is going to work with us rather than against us," Dancer noted.

"Up to a point," Kyven said. "I'm sure Alak will be pissed at us when we go through, even though he already knows what's going to happen."

"You still intend to spare the Cariners?" Stalker asked.

He nodded. "The humans will need at least *one* place that's not quite as destroyed from which to rebuild, and Carin will be it," he replied. "Because Alak's going to cooperate with us, we'll spare him the mass slaughter and burning every building we can find to the ground. But there won't be so much as a kernel of corn left anywhere in Carin when we march out, so they won't go *completely* unscathed. But compared to what we'll do to kingdoms like Georvan and Flaur and Alamar, Carin will get off *easy*."

"Alamar," Stalker said with a growl deep in his throat.

"Will be a memory by this time next year, brother, and that's a guarantee," Kyven said grimly. "When we march out of Alamar, there won't be anyone left alive behind us."

Dancer gave him a slightly surprised look. “Anyone?”

“*Anyone*,” he told her, looking her directly in the eyes. “That’s what I meant when I told you what we’re going to do, Dancer, and the price you will pay for joining me. When we walk out of Alamar, there won’t be a human left alive behind us. Not a man. Not a woman. Not a child. Not an *infant*. We will wipe Alamar off the map and leave no one that can even carry its memory, Dancer. We will scour it and everything it represented off the face of Noraam,” he declared in a cold, nearly frighteningly emotionless voice. “That is why you will share my fate when this is over, sister. And that’s why if I wake up in the morning and you’re not here, I won’t blame you one bit.”

She was silent a long moment. “I’ll be here in the morning, brother,” she told him soberly. “I don’t have to like what we’ll have to do, but I understand that it *must* be done.”

“Exactly,” he said in a suddenly weary tone. “We won’t be doing that to every city and town we destroy, but Alamar is a special case. Alamar represents the human enslavement of the Arcans more than just about any other city in Noraam. It was built on the slave trade, and it exists purely and solely to perpetuate Arcan bondage. And in the case of Alamar, completely exterminating its entire population is *necessary*, as both a vehicle to create change in basic human society and as a powerful symbol of the change coming to Noraam. Alamar must be not only destroyed, but every physical reminder of it eradicated off this world as a stark and powerful symbol to the rest of Noraam that the old ways, the days of Arcan slavery, will never return. This isn’t just a crusade to free the Arcans, brothers, sisters. This is a campaign to change the basic foundations of human society, and that’s going to require drastic actions. The festering and diseased parts of human civilization have to be excised to save the rest, and Alamar is one of the most diseased infections that exists in human civilization, an entire kingdom that exists for the sole purpose of bringing misery and horror to the Arcans. So we will purge it from Noraam to save the rest of humanity from being tainted by the contamination Alamar has brought into human society.”

All of them were silent a long moment, and even Stalker seemed to lose a bit of his enthusiasm over the idea of killing humans as they contemplated the enormity of what Kyven was telling them, and what price they would pay for having a hand in it. Sirra, sensing the gravity around the campfire, padded over and flopped herself down mostly in Kyven's lap, pinning his legs to the ground. Given she weighed nearly as much as he did, she was fairly good at pinning him down when she was serious about it. Kyven scrubbed his fingers through her thick, unusual fur, which felt both wiry and soft at the same time. Her fur had two layers, with an outer layer and an undercoat. The outer layer was wiry, but the undercoat was thick and soft, which insulated her from external changes in temperature, be it heat or cold. "So, if I wake up tomorrow morning and I'm the only one here, not only will I not blame any of you, I'd think that you came to your senses," he told them conversationally. "Only a madman would willingly join me in what I have to do. It's *my* burden, not yours."

Clover gave him a look that was both serious and playful at the same time. "Sanity has never been one of my strong suits, brother," she told him in a light voice. "After all, I've considered you a friend for quite a while now."

"No Shaman carries a burden alone," Stalker declared, giving him a serious look. "I will carry this burden with you, my brother."

"If I didn't believe that what you're doing is right, I wouldn't have come in the first place," Dancer added. "As I said, I understand *why* it must be done. I am a Shaman. I will do what must be done, because it is what is *needed*."

"And we know that you don't want to do it any more than we do, brother," Clover added. "While what's coming may be monstrous, we know that it doesn't make us monsters. And in time, I honestly think the humans will come to realize it as well. History is written by the victors, brother. We simply make sure *we* are the ones that pen the annals that our descendents read, so they know the truth of what happened here."

“Well said, sister,” Stalker nodded.

“You’d be lost without us, Shaman,” Striker told him easily. “We can’t leave you alone. Why, you’d never make it to Flaur without us. You’d probably end up in the middle of the Angry Sea.”

Kyven laughed. “Two words for you, Striker. Easily. Replaced.”

The coyote laughed and flashed him a toothy smile.

“We are your Arcans, Shaman. We will be with you always,” Ebony declared in a strong voice. “No matter how much of a chore it is to babysit you.”

Kyven laughed earnestly, then flinched away from Sirra’s tongue after she sat up and tried to lick his face. “I love you too, Ebony,” he retorted, pushing gently at Sirra’s neck and jaw to deflect her. The Lupan took issue with his attempts to thwart her affections, so she bulled into his chest and drove him down to the ground, much to the delight and laughter of the others. Trapped under the pony-sized monster, Kyven laughed and spluttered and tried to protect himself from an overexuberant Lupan, whose tail was wagging uncontrollably as she licked his face and neck.

It was one the little joys in life, he supposed as he struggled under his furry companion, that he would need to cling to over the coming months, if only to save his sanity. The genuine and unconditional affection Sirra had for him, and the more reserved but no less sincere affection held by Dauro, they were simple things, pure things, a beacon of light to part the coming darkness...a darkness he himself would spread across the land like an insidious plague. He would need to live in the moment, take things one day at a time, else the weight of the future would crush him under its uncaring heel. If he thought too much about what was coming, it would take away whatever joy he might be able to find in his life until it was over. Every time he found joy or wonderment or contentment in the coming weeks and months, it would be his own little victory to offset the enormity of what he knew he had to do, and what was coming.

It was the little victories. Those were what mattered most to a man who knew that his future held no happy ending.

Chapter 2

This...this is where he would begin.

Pulling Vasha up, he patted her on the base of her neck as she pranced in place after stopping. Her coat was dusty and had some burrs in it from their long and very arduous journey, showing the mark of their hard travel in her ungroomed condition. But it had been necessary to get into position so he'd be in the right place and the right time once the human armies to the north stopped fighting each other and banded together to fight the Arcans. He knew that was going to happen, when Danvers and Danna proved they were far more of a threat than the human generals believed, and particularly after they destroyed the mines in Atan, Brackenveld, and Two River. When there were no longer any mines to fight over, the humans would come after the ones who had destroyed them, as well as the ones that posed the greatest threat to human civilization.

They would go after Danna and the Arcans over what Kyven was doing in Flaur.

They were trying to go after her right now, but DeVaur had not moved fast enough. There was a gigantic stalemate just west of Chardon back up to the north, where DeVaur and the Georvans were almost besieged by the combined armies of the Baltons, Mallons, Phioni, and the Jenn Colonists, and with the Yora, Hammish and Mennish marching in their direction. There were far too many northerners for DeVaur to split his armies, so he had advanced to the south and west of Chardon and dug in to prepare for the northerners, a move that protected his supply lines and let him set up in favorable terrain. He *had* sent about two thousand cavalry west to scout out the defenses at Atan, as many men as he felt he could afford to lose, and those men would arrive at Atan early tomorrow morning. When DeVaur got his report back from that expeditionary force, then things up north were

going to get very ugly very fast. When DeVaur understood the full size and scope of the Arcan army, a size that Danna and Wilson Danvers had kept carefully concealed, it was going to change the dynamics of what was going on up there.

And this is where he would begin. Kyven and his friends were standing on the edge of a stand of mixed pine and oak trees looking at a plantation, and a very large one. In fact, it was one of the largest plantations in all of Flaur, a gigantic farm as large as entire counties up north that produced cotton, sugar, rice, and other foodstuffs, all owned by one family. This plantation rested at the very tip of the Flauren peninsula, with nothing but swamp and wetland south of it that sank into the sea, and owned by the king of Flaur himself. The royal family had owned this land for generations, and the wealth it provided was one of the major reasons why his family had rose to power. The plantation was almost an entire small town all to itself, and what interested them the most, there were nearly a *thousand* Arcan slaves scattered across the minars of farmland in little shanty towns, each shanty responsible for a different part of the plantation. Arcans could live their entire lives in one shanty town producing just one crop and never work in a different field. And there were only about a hundred humans overseeing those thousand Arcans, whose cruelty and brutality were well known all the way in Haven.

The four figures hanging from a tree branch not far from them, sitting along the road to the gate into the plantation, was stark evidence of that. They were Arcans, dead Arcans who had been hung up by the neck and then skinned. Their raw, bloody bodies twisted in the warm wind as vultures perched on their heads and shoulders and pecked at their exposed flesh, since they'd torn out the Arcans' eyes and tongues long ago. Most often an Arcan corpse would be butchered to feed the meat to other Arcans, which meant that these four had to be an object lesson of some sort...but to whom was the question. The Arcans couldn't really see them hanging out here. As near as Kyven could figure, they'd probably slipped their collars and tried to escape, and such was the fate of any Arcan recaptured by its master when that master felt that they could afford to lose the investment.

One hundred humans, give or take, all of them farm workers and overseers. From what Kyven had managed to glean in his surveillance of the farm, there were about two hundred more humans who were family to the workers, living on the plantation in small but cozy and well-built houses clustered at the very center of the plantation, houses built to deal with the sweltering heat of a Flauren summer. There was a grand plantation house at that central village of sorts, but it currently stood empty; it served as a vacation house for the king of Flaur, and he didn't even permit servants to live in the house when he wasn't there.

Sirra and Dauro melted out of the trees and came to a stop at either side of Vasha's legs, both of them looking even leaner and more savage after eight days of very hard, grueling travel. Dauro growled softly as he sniffed at the air, no doubt smelling the bloody corpses nearby.

"I know, boy," Kyven said in a low, grim tone, already preparing himself for what he knew he had to do. "But there's nothing we can do for them now except avenge them."

"And we will," Stalker said in a savage voice, rage lurking within it and barely controlled.

"Flauren, Stalker, Flauren," Kyven chided gently in Flauren. During the trip, his three Shaman friends had bargained with the spirits to teach them and his nannies Flauren, so there would be no language barrier in what was coming. Being unable to speak to the Arcans they were about to free would be a critical liability if they had to make them do something fast. "You have to get used to speaking it. For the next few weeks, it's the only language you're really going to use when speaking to anyone not in this group."

"I keep forgetting," he said with a dark chuckle, speaking Flauren.

"What is our plan, brother?" Clover asked, looking up at him.

"I'll go in first and disable as many weapons as I can, and block the door of the armory so they can't get at those weapons. The rest of you wait

until two hours before midnight, then come to me. We'll attack the central village as soon as you reach me, and I'll start it by setting fire to the main barracks," he replied evenly. "All the humans live in one place and rely on the collars to keep the Arcans in their shanty towns overnight, and we'll use that against them to take all of them out in one fell swoop. Tomorrow morning, we'll range out and free the Arcans in the shanty towns and get them organized. When we attack, brother, sisters, friends, kill every single adult male human you encounter. All of them, no matter what they do, even if they surrender. Kill anyone else who resists, and round up anyone who doesn't." He closed his eyes and bowed his head. "And be ready," he said in a grim tone. "We show mercy only to those who surrender. If *anyone* resists in any way, no matter how small or petty the resistance, no matter how defenseless or harmless they are, kill them."

"Mercy to these animals?" Stalker said darkly.

"How we'll leave them will not make it seem in any way like a mercy, brother," Kyven said with a dark look. "It might be more merciful to kill them and save them the suffering that's coming, but the king of Flaur won't be quite so moved about the plight of his people if they're already dead. Children dying in the streets of pestilence and starvation will cause much more outrage than butchered villages once word gets out of what's happening down here."

Stalker gave him a slightly surprised look, then nodded quietly.

"Dancer, no doubt there will be plenty of injuries for you to heal," he warned the red vixen, who was the best healer among them. "But you do *not* heal any human, even one not resisting."

"I understand, brother."

He glanced up at the sun, and saw that it was midafternoon. They wouldn't have to wait very long. He climbed down from Vasha's back and patted her fondly on the shoulder, and she lowered her head down and butted her snout playfully against his chest. "You've come a long way in a short time, girl, but I'm sorry, we won't have much time to rest," he told

her, stroking her nose fondly. “Go with Striker and try your best not to kill him. I have to go in alone from here. Striker,” he called.

His coyote friend advanced with what was going to make this illusion work, a horse taken from a farmstead they crossed that morning, whom Dancer and Clover had Blessed to allow the animal to keep up with the others without dying. Kyven built an image in his mind, exceptionally detailed and exacting, and then beckoned the shadow fox for the energy to bring his vision into reality, and she responded. His image shimmered, and then was replaced by a portly middle-aged man wearing a simple white cassock and black collar, a wide-brimmed white felt hat with the holy symbol of the Trinity emblazoned upon it, but wearing extravagant leather boots with swirling designs and expensive white trousers. It was the image of a cleric of the Trinity, whom Flauren tradition would demand that the plantation workers accept among them and offer a meal and a bed if needed. Kyven put his foot in the stirrup of the well-made, worn saddle they’d stolen from the farmstead, making sure to get a riding saddle rather than a work saddle, and he tugged a bit at the illusory cassock to make it fall more properly around the horse. Though it was nothing but a figment of his imagination, Kyven had instilled such substance into the illusion that, when combined with his complete belief that his illusion was real, caused the illusion to bend and fold around the saddle and horse as if it were real cloth, and without Kyven having to imagine the illusion moving in the way that it did. The illusion was intruding into reality to such a degree that it was interacting with physical objects, mainly since the horse didn’t have the willpower to resist the version of reality that Kyven was imposing upon it.

Reality was naught but one’s point of view, after all.

“I’ll do what I can to get them ready for you,” he said. “But be careful when you move in regardless. No doubt I’ll miss a few muskets. Sirra, Dauro, stay with the others. And tonight, be ready to kill,” he called, which caused both of the Lupans to growl softly.

Hidden behind his guise of a Flauren cleric, Kyven rode his horse onto the dirt road leading out of the woods and towards the arching sign naming

the plantation, with whitewashed rail fence extending out of sight on this flat land in either direction. Kyven rode slowly and easily, as if he had not a care in the world, as he reoriented his mind to assume a new identity. He stopped thinking in Noravi and started thinking in Flauren, began *believing* that he was Shoran DeSann, Flauren cleric and shepherd of the souls of patriotic Flaurens everywhere, even as his new identity's entire life history fell into place in his mind. He reached the overhead sign calling the plantation the King's Gardens. The plantation was about fifty minars south of the Flauren town of Parai, which was the southernmost city of any size on the peninsula.

The peninsula. Kyven rode along as he pondered how much had *changed* since the days when Danvers' old map was the way the world was, and the way it was now. The Flauren city of Parai had once been known as *Palm Bay*. Parai was the southernmost large town on the east side of the peninsula, but back when it was called *Palm Bay*, it was barely *halfway* down the peninsula. In the thousand years between one map and the other, the entire southern half of the Flauren peninsula had sunk into the sea. King's Gardens was one of the largest plantations in Flaur which dominated the entire southernmost tip of dry land on the peninsula. South of the plantation was about fifty minars of swamp and wetlands, and then south of that there was what was called the Shallow Sea...and it was called that because at one time the mud that lurked only about five rods under the surface of the ocean had once been dry land. A tall man could walk minars out into the ocean and keep his head above water, at least during low tide. When high tide came, that same man would most likely drown before getting back to a point where he could put his feet on the bottom and still breathe. It was like that for nearly a hundred minars southward, and then it finally began to deepen...which correlated almost perfectly with the map Danvers had. The Shallow Sea ended right at the southern edge of what used to be the peninsula known back then as *Florida*.

There were deeper channels through the Shallow Sea that ships used to cross it safely, which cut days off their travel time.

The strange part was, while Flaur had sunk into the sea, most of the rest of Noraam was remarkably unchanged. The coastline of today wasn't much different from the coastline on Danvers' ancient map, with only one real exception, the Free Territories. Kyven pondered that as he rode onto the plantation, wondering what cataclysm had occurred in the distant past that had caused half of Flaur to sink into the sea, yet had not affected the rest of Noraam to any great effect. Had the Breach caused Flaur to sink into the sea? It had certainly rearranged the geography of most of what was now the Free Territories, since the Breach had occurred south of Avannar—or what had once been Avannar—and back then had been a military fortress known as *Marine Corps Base Quantico*. The explosion had shattered the land, created a crater minars wide that was still visible today as a giant shallow bowl-like depression north of Fredick's Burrough and south of Woodenvale, and was considered some of the best farmland in the Territories because the soil was remarkably devoid of rocks. It had changed the coastal topography of the shores of the Great Bay, and had seeded the entire eastern regions of Noraam with mana crystals, with some flying as far as the Great Snake River far to the west

A dusty human farmhand with dirt stained on his cotton shirt rode towards him as he walked his horse along the road leading into the plantation, who was overseeing a work gang of nearly fifty Arcans who were toiling in a cotton field. "A good afternoon to you, Father," the farmhand said in the southern dialect of Flauren. "What brings you to King's Gardens?"

"I'm on a sojourn, my son," he said simply. A cleric on a sojourn wandered aimlessly, wherever he believed that the gods of the Trinity guided him, on a spiritual journey where he was supposed to care for the common man. "Might a humble cleric beg a meal and a bed from you good folk this night?"

"Of course, of course, Father!" he said amiably, taking off his hat and slapping it against his thigh, creating a small cloud of dust. "You just keep riding up this road for about ten more minars and you'll come to a village. Any of the women there can take care of you."

“Why thank you, my son. Truth be told, I’m quite ready for a hot meal and some rest. It’s been a long ride.”

Kyven left the man to go back to his Arcan slaves, putting the friendly man and the Arcans out of his mind at the moment so they didn’t interfere with his disguise. It took him nearly an hour to reach the little village, not long before sunset, and it was bustling with activity from the wives and Arcan servants. Kyven had scouted the village from the shadow world, so he was already familiar with its layout. There were some fifty buildings here, a healthy village just about anywhere, with half of them houses for the workers and the other half work buildings. They had centralized most of their operation here at this village with smaller satellite work buildings near the Arcan shanty towns. The main barns were here. The main blacksmith and on-plantation alchemist forge was here. The plantation had its own alchemist whose primary duty was to make collars and other farm-specific alchemical devices and replace crystals in those devices. There was a large barracks-style bunkhouse for the unmarried overseers, a fairly large building housing some forty men. And beyond the village, encircled in an intricate wrought iron fence, was the grand plantation house belonging to the King of Flaur, currently sitting empty.

A very pretty young woman stopped his horse at the edge of the village, carrying wet clothes in a wicker basket. “Good afternoon, Father,” she said with a dazzling smile. “What can we do for you today?”

“One of the farmhands sent me here, my good young lady,” he replied with a gentle smile on his illusory face. “He said I might find a hot meal and a clean bed this night.”

“Why, of course you will, Father!” she told him, turning and pointing. “Go to that building right there and ask for Matron Maria. She’ll get you all sorted out in no time.”

Kyven tipped the brim of his hat to the pretty young lady. “Thank you, my good young lady,” he replied in a kind voice. “Peace of the Trinity be upon you.”

“To you too, Father.”

Kyven gave over his horse to a teenage boy, then spoke to Matron Maria, whom was a rather stern and severe-looking woman of middle age, gray streaking her, and she brought him to the bunkhouse. She took him through the main barracks and to one of the small overseer’s rooms in the back. “This room is empty, Father,” she said in her severe voice. “Please make yourself at ease. We’ll be serving the evening meal as soon as the farmhands come in. I’ll have someone come fetch you if you’d like to rest before the meal, Father.”

“That sounds wonderful, good Matron, but I’ll be out and about. After all day sitting down, I think a walk would do wonders for me.”

“Then I’ll see you at evening meal, Father.”

As soon as Maria was out of the room, Kyven got to work. He opened his eyes to the spirits first, made sure no one else was in the barracks, then he ranged out and moved through the barracks, breaking every musket he found by breaking the trigger completely off all the way into the stock of the weapon, which wouldn’t be easily noticeable. Some of them may not even notice until they tried to pull the trigger that wasn’t there. He kept a constant vigil with spirit sight, watching the people and Arcans outside the barracks, moving swiftly through the barracks with confidence, since he’d studied the place the night before while all the single men were sleeping to find all their muskets and other weapons. Once he finished, he strolled out of the barracks and greeted and shook hands down the street, tipping his hat to the many ladies who were rushing about, some of them doing final chores while evening meal cooked on the stoves and over the fires back home. He moved without purpose and with an easy gait, looking entirely like a man taking a leisurely stroll, but when he reached the door to the armory building, holding the surplus collars, as well as pain sticks, additional muskets, and other weaponry, he paused to adjust his hat. Meanwhile, under the illusion, he sent a tendril of solid shadow into the keyhole of the lock and broke its internal workings, which would make the lock impossible to open. The men out watching over the Arcans didn’t put

their weapons in the armory after coming back in, it was only opened if they needed to take something out or put something in.

He was invited to take the evening meal in any number of houses in the village, including the main overseer's large house near the main house, but he opted instead to take the meal in the main barracks with the unmarried men. He gave a lengthy and somewhat jaunty blessing of the meal, then sat with them as he seemed to politely inquire as to what men did, but was really gathering essential information for the next day. Through asking them men what their days entailed, he found out which fields produced what, where they were, and how many Arcans were stationed in each field. His illusion showed no aversion when he found out why the four Arcans were hanging outside the plantation—for trying to escape, as he suspected—and listened as the men laughed about how they'd tortured the four of them in front of the other Arcans as a warning. He kept his calm, if only because he knew that every single man in the barracks was eating his last meal.

After eating, to avoid exposing the fact that he wasn't a true Flauren when they started playing music and singing songs he didn't know, he excused himself to go for another walk through town just after sunset and to speak with the other residents, who were practicing the old Flauren custom of sitting on the porch after sunset, once the threat of mosquitoes abated, to enjoy the cool night air. Flaurens tended to stay up late because they rested through the hottest part of the day. While he did so, he kept careful track of most of the married men, using spirit sight under his illusion to mark their locations, noting which ones had gone to bed early. He stayed out for nearly two hours, advancing up onto porches and shaking hands, inquiring about health, offering advice, doing all the things that the residents expected a Flauren cleric to do.

Half the unmarried men were asleep when he returned to the barracks, and Kyven begged off any conversation, claiming to be tired and ready for bed. He retreated to the private room they'd offered him and laid down for a while, waiting for everyone outside of the barracks to go to sleep. There were a large group of men playing poker in the barracks, but Kyven discounted them, since they would die first and thus be no threat. Using

spirit sight, he kept watch on the houses he could see and the people inside them, and when the last couple went to bed, he sat up and prepared himself for action. He dismissed the illusion and checked his pistols to make sure they were loaded and chambered, checked his rifle, checked his shockrod and two firetubes, checked his impact rod, checked the talker he'd use to contact Clover in case there was a change in plans, and once all his equipment passed inspection, he began.

His body dissolved into living shadow, appearing to be a two-dimensional paper cut-out figure moving about in the real world, then he converged a shadow gateway around his feet and brought it up his body, bringing him into the shadow world. With the moonlight streaming down over the village, it cast the entire village in shadow, and that brought most of the village into the shadow world. He could see almost everything within the shadow world, represented there with more clarity than normal, almost as if the stars and weather were aware of his intent and cooperated to give him the best chance of success. He saw that most of the villagers were sleeping, only a few moving around, and what was most important, the men in the barracks were either asleep or their attention was completely absorbed in their poker game.

It was time.

Setting his gateway to return him to the real world just by the main door of the barracks, the men playing poker didn't see the dark shadow shimmer at the dim end of the barracks. But they *did* notice when all sound just ended among them, unable to hear their own voices, the scraping of the chairs on the floor, or anything else. They looked around in confusion, and that confusion became shock when two men suddenly had blood and brains sprayed across their faces, and a man collapsed onto the table face first, a large hole blown through his head. Those two men moved to jump to their feet, but they pitched over backwards in total silence, and the other three men moved to jump up as well. But they too were cut down in total silence, even their bodies falling to the floor causing not a whisper of sound.

At the door, Kyven holstered his two smoking pistols and canceled the spell of silence, then a single gesture sent a cloud of shadow billowing through the barracks, plunging the already dim barracks into dark shadows. His eyes open to the spirits, merged to the shadows so that not even his glowing eyes would be visible, Kyven pulled his two firetubes, turned partially behind him, and activated one of them. Intense flame issued forth from the tip, catching the door and walls around it on fire, but the light of that fire was consumed by the dark cloud of shadow contained within the barracks, creating undulating, chaotic shimmers and flares of light within the barracks, a nightmarish, surreal sight to any that might see it.. Kyven walked along the center row of the barracks, and one by one to each side of himself, he bathed the sleeping men in their bunks with intense fire from the firetubes, raking it across every bunk as he walked past, catching the bunks on fire, the men in those bunks on fire, and all the combustible cloth and flooring around them on fire. The agonized shrieks of the first man startled most of the others awake, who couldn't see anything because of the cloud of shadow trapped in the barracks. They boiled out of their beds as the men behind Kyven burned, stumbling and fumbling in the shifting darkness, only catching the faintest distorted glimpses of ruddy reddish light from the fires. Kyven kicked a man that wandered into the central isle in the hip and knocked him onto the floor, then the man screamed in utter agony and writhed on the floor when Kyven turned both firetubes on him. His convulsions were almost mercifully ended seconds later after he passed out from the pain, and simply stepped around the burning body, stepping up onto and then over a nearby bunk, lighting it on fire almost as an afterthought as he went over it. The heat from the fires to each side and behind him started tightening his skin, and smoke began to build in the barracks, making it hard to breathe as the men recoiled from that heat, and shouts of fire started coming from them between hacking coughs from the smoke.

But it was too late for them. Half the barracks room was on fire, an intense fire that spread quickly, and Kyven's cloud of shadow made it impossible for them to even see the flames that were consuming the building.

Kyven advanced and set fire to the other door out of the barracks, sealing the men inside and sealing them to their doom, then converged a gateway under his feet and pulled it up and over his body. The *things* took note of him, since he wasn't in his shadow form, and the shadow world had the vertigo-inducing chaos about it caused by his real world body warping its shadowy reality. He took a single step and converged another gateway, again at his feet, and pulled it up over his body even as he willed himself to *fall* into it, causing him to set his feet lightly on the rooftop of the armory down the street from the barracks. Men and women wearing nightclothes were running towards the barracks, as the men inside screamed in agony and fear while flames billowed from the windows and walls. They were trapped inside, and Kyven's cloud of shadow that was still inside the barracks made it impossible for them to find the windows from which they could climb out, if only they could *see* them. Kyven saw one man manage just that, struggling out of a window with fire licking at the roof over his head, and the man was shrieking even as he tried to get through. Two men rushed up and pulled him out, and the reason for his screaming became evident when he tumbled to the ground, for his legs were being consumed by fire. The two men dragged the man away from the burning building, at least until one of them collapsed to the ground in a heap.

They all heard the sharp crack of the rifle, but they didn't put it together until the second man helping the burning man also fell, a pink spray issuing from his forehead. Several men and women looked back in his direction, and he heard multiple screams of anger and fear when they saw the figure on the roof of the armory, holding a rifle, whose eyes were glowing with an unmistakable green radiance.

“*Shaman!*”

Two more men fell before they could react, as the nightclothes-clad villagers scattered, the men rushing for their houses to get their muskets. One of those men was thrown into the air when a brilliant flash of light was preceded by the sharp crack of thunder, and Stalker flashed into view between two buildings, running with magical speed and a look of frightening eagerness on his face as he started killing the humans he so

hated. Stalker's eyes glowed with amber radiance as he killed another man with channeled lightning, running so impossibly fast that many of them couldn't even track him in the darkness thanks to his black fur, rushing right through a grouping of villagers and vanishing between two houses before any of them could react. As they turned to look in his direction, Clover came up behind them, also running with magical speed, killing a man with channeled lightning, sliding to a stop in a cloud of dust, then channeling a withering blast of cold against a group of five men, killing all of them instantly as their bodies flash-froze and rimed over with frost. Dancer appeared on a rooftop across from Kyven, and she made a thrusting gesture with one hand, then raised her hand palm up. Jagged lances of stone erupted from the ground under the feet of several men, and they impaled them with brutal speed. Their bodies twitched as they hung from the jagged spears of rock, then they went limp as blood poured onto the torn ground beneath them.

And that was the beginning of the end. With *four* Shaman attacking the village, it threw the villagers into a complete panic. Women and children screamed and ran in every direction as the men died one after one, killed with surgical precision by the four Shaman, killed by blasts of fire and lightning, deathly cold, spears of stone, blazing shafts of light, and by the human Shaman's rifle as he stood on the roof of the armory and killed every man he could put in his sights. Men with muskets in their hands died almost instantly as they opened the doors of their houses, unaware that the Shaman could see through the walls and could see them coming, and the ten men that tried to charge the armory to get to the weapons within were cut down by Kyven's rifle. Women and children were not spared in the ugly massacre, several still forms on the ground, but many of them weren't dead. Clover was moving through the humans with magical speed, and a light, almost gentle touch on the women and children as she passed put them into a magical sleep, knocking them unconscious and putting them out of the battle. But she showed the men no such mercy, killing any man that she encountered as she raced back and forth among the buildings, never slowing down, disappearing behind and between buildings so fast that no human could track her movements.

The collared Arcans stood almost dumbfounded, watching the scene unfolding before them with almost disbelieving eyes. They ran through the streets unchallenged, though their collars prevented them from fleeing...and slowly, they began to realize that the attackers were only going after the *humans*, leaving them untouched. And as they started to get good views of the attackers, saw the glowing eyes, saw the Arcans, they began to weep, several falling to their knees and burying their faces in their hands. Finally, their prayers to the spirits had been answered. Finally, the Shaman had come.

But it wasn't just Shaman. Uncollared Arcans moved quickly through the village, taking the collared ones by the hands and pulling them to safety, gathering them in a central area where they wouldn't get accidentally harmed. The collared Arcans saw these three Arcans kill humans that got in their way with claws or an impact rod, and they saw gigantic wolf-like animals savaging a man between two houses, tearing him apart. Then a monstrous horse barreled out from behind a house and crushed a man with a musket into the ground with its forehooves, stomping him. It gave a loud, ominous bray and then kicked a fleeing teenage boy, folding his body around its back hoof and breaking his back, leaving him laying motionless on the ground behind it. These were *monsters*, the Arcans realized, monsters that were attacking the humans along with the Shaman and their Arcan helpers.

After several moments of complete chaos, as bodies started to pile up in the village streets, quite a few of the women tried to flee the village...and every single one that did was killed by Stalker. Any woman or child that left the perimeter of the village barely made it twenty steps before the large wolf Arcan raced by with magical speed and ripped the life out of them with his claws. After seeing their companions fall, the women and children trying to flee the village turned back, realizing even in their terror that leaving the village was instant death. They ran back to the corpse-littered streets and burning buildings, and when they did so, they were put to sleep one by one by the racing Clover, adding their own bodies to the littered figures clogging the streets of their small village.

In a shockingly short amount of time, it was over. Kyven lowered his rifle when the last of the village's men was laying dead on the ground, and the remaining women and children were being rounded up by his brothers and sisters. His nannies and the monsters herded the frightened Arcans down the street once the last of the resistance was killed off, as women and children started to awaken from Clover's spell of sleeping and were rounded up by the Shaman, put in the village square. They were weeping and babbling, the mothers clutching their children. They were made to sit on the ground as the barracks burned, sending angry red light across the village, and Kyven came down off the roof of the armor and slung his rifle over his shoulder. The women and children gaped at him, seeing a *human* with glowing eyes, a *human* Shaman. Kyven came to a stop at the edge of the gathered survivors, some 83 women and children. "Don't completely drain those collars," Kyven warned as Dancer started to take the collars off the enslaved Arcans. "They're set so the wearer can't leave the boundary of the village. Put them on the humans and drain the crystals so they only last for another two days before failing. That should keep these people out of our hair until we're long gone."

"Aye, brother," Dancer nodded, turning back to the little mouse Arcan, looking at Dancer like she was the Son of the Father Himself come down from heaven to take her to the promised land.

"How could you?" one of the women accused in Flauren. "How could you sell your soul and side with the spawn of the devil?"

The woman's head snapped back and she crumpled to the ground in a boneless heap. The other women and children screamed and nearly broke and ran at the sound of the gunshot, flinching away as Kyven lowered the smoking barrel of his pistol.

But one of them didn't flinch away. "You killed my mother! You're a monster!" a boy shouted, jumping to his feet. He was about eight or nine, with a handsome face and dark, storming eyes.

Kyven didn't hesitate. The barrel of the pistol came back up and reported loudly two times in rapid succession, and the boy staggered back in a spray of blood from his chest, then collapsed to the ground as women screamed.

"The next person to speak a single word dies," Kyven called in a voice that was horrifying in its calmness, as much as the coldness in his eyes. There was no doubt among the humans that he would do *exactly* as he threatened. Frightened mothers clamped their hands over the mouths of their children, understanding with horror that this was a man that *would* kill their children. Kyven holstered his pistol as the three Shaman looked at him, their eyes slightly haunted as the full impact of Kyven's many warnings finally began to hit home for them. To know what must be done was one thing. To see Kyven carry through with it without hesitation and with little outward emotion...that was *terrifying*. "Ebony, once Dancer gets the collars off our brothers and sisters, have them range out and gather up all the food and weapons in the village. They're house Arcans, they know where all of it is. Have them gather up all the packs and saddlebags they can find so we can carry it. Striker, take Fastpaw and empty out the armory. Get some axes, you'll have to break down the door. I broke the lock," he said, pointing to the building. "Put any collar with a crystal in it aside for Dancer to use on the humans and stack all the weaponry over on the side of the road outside the village so we can hand them out to the Arcans, and also so this lot can't get at them. Once you finish there, collect up anything that can even remotely be used as a weapon, like pitchforks and blacksmith's hammers, and make sure you get anything they can use to cut off the collars. The blacksmith is over there, and the alchemist shop is right there. When you finish, burn all three buildings to the ground so the villagers can't use anything we might miss."

"Yes, Shaman," Striker nodded, and he and his spotted cat companion hurried off into the inferno-illuminated night.

"Clover, sister, if you please, go through the village and destroy every collar key you find," he called. "I don't want this lot getting free before we're out of here, they'll warn Parai and put a posse on our trail. Go

through each house and make sure we don't miss anything usable, and once you're done, set fire to it to deny anything we miss to the humans we leave behind."

"Of course, brother," she nodded, then hurried off towards the nearest house.

Several woman gave startled cries when Dauro trotted towards them, carrying the arm and partial torso of one of the men killed in the attack, the gory bottom of it trailing nearly two rods of entrails on the ground behind it. Two women retched violently as the Lupan dropped his grisly trophy at Kyven's feet, sitting down and looking up the small difference between their eyes with a proud expression and his tail wagging a little bit. "Good boy," Kyven said, patting Dauro on the head.

Those gruesome remains laid there, from which many of the women just could not look away as the Shaman started releasing weeping Arcans, the mangled corpse unrecognizable as some women no doubt wondered if that was *their* husband laying there in pieces, if it was the man that they'd known and loved that met such a horrible end. Kyven made several of the women flinch when he put his foot on the bloody torso and kicked it over, making the lone mangled arm flop over and nearly hit one of the women in the knees. She scrambled back away from the grisly thing, both her hands clamped over her own mouth to keep from screaming.

Kyven stood emotionless watch over the surviving villagers as his Arcan companions did their jobs. His nannies got the newly freed Arcans to gather up all the village's food and put it over with the weapons, outside of the boundary of the village where the women and children couldn't reach them. Dancer removed the collars off the 39 house Arcans in the village, all of them wearing little serving dresses for the females and black trousers with no shirt for the males, then one by one, Dancer placed partially drained collars on the women and children, most of them shrinking back from the resolute-looking vixen when she stepped up to put the collars on them. Kyven noted that much of the light playfulness that was usually in the red vixen's face was now gone. Once the last of the humans were collared from

collars taken from the armory and using crystals from the village's own stocks, crystals Kyven had to choose that could power a collar uncut for a day or two after Dancer drained most of its magic, Dancer helped Striker and Fastpaw gather up the last of the weapons. They then set fire to the three buildings Kyven had pointed out. And one by one, as the Arcans and Clover swept through a house, they set fire to it. Soon, the entire village was on fire, with the gathered humans literally surrounded by burning buildings, safe in the open area near the center of the village. They watched with haunted eyes as their homes and everything they had ever known burned to the ground, as some few of them realized, in the silence of their souls, that the lives they had known up to that moment was utterly and irrevocably *gone*, that nothing would ever be the same again.

But Kyven wasn't done. When most of the tasks were complete, they gathered up their freed Arcans by the terrified humans. "I am Kyven Steelhammer, brothers and sisters. The rumors of me might have even reached you here. I am the human Shaman," he declared. "I walk with the spirits and do their will, and their will is that I am *your* Shaman." He pointed at the women and children. "Look at them, brothers and sisters. Look," he ordered. "There is no more need to fear them. *They* wear the collars now," he declared, which made several of the Arcans look at Kyven strangely. "But there's one final thing that must be done before we go out and free our brothers and sisters in the shanty towns, something I want all of you to do with me." He pointed at the magnificent plantation house owned by the King of Flaur. "Everyone take up a branch or torch and go throw it in the plantation house. We will burn it to the ground," he said in a strong voice. "A house built from the blood and bones and pain of the Arcans. An abomination like that cannot be allowed to stand.

"I just ask you to be patient, brothers and sisters. When we free the rest of the Arcans from the shanties, we'll explain to you what we're doing. Until then, just trust in us and be assured that you are *safe*. We've killed all the human men in the village," he called, which made several of the human women moan or start to weep, "and what's left will cause you no trouble."

“Why not kill them, honored Shaman?” one of the Arcans asked, a very young male cat.

“Because death isn’t a strong enough punishment for the sins they’ve committed,” Kyven replied stonily. “I want them to *suffer*, little brother, to know just a small portion of the daily horror they’ve put *you* through for nearly a thousand years. It’s the only way they can even come close to knowing your pain. The dead learn no lessons, young one. Now let’s finish this and send a message to every human on Noraam, that the age of Arcan slavery is over,” he called.

With Kyven leading them, they marched resolutely through the village, carrying torches and burning branches and pieces of wood, marching through the gate of the house grounds and up to its magnificent columned entry porch and front door. One by one, they threw them onto the porch of the immaculate plantation house, and some few threw them through the glass windows, breaking the silence with the sound of shattering glass. The many burning brands caught their flame on the wood of the columned porch, on the expensive Phioni carpets and Flauren-made curtains inside, and quickly, the front of the whitewashed walls were on fire. They stepped back and watched as the fire spread quickly, the flames licking eagerly at the old, seasoned wood, until the entire large house was engulfed in an inferno.

They watched for long moments, then Kyven turned his back to the conflagration and addressed them. “We’re done here,” he called. “We’re going to range out and free all the Arcans from their collars in the shanty towns. No doubt the light of the fire has attracted their attention, and perhaps also men from Parai,” he noted. “I’m going to ask you to help us, brothers and sisters. Help us carry the weapons and supplies we’ve taken from the humans, and once we’ve freed the others, we’ll leave this place forever. Once we’re far enough away from here, we’ll explain exactly what it is we’re doing and how you can help us, if you so wish it. You are *free* now, brothers and sisters, and that freedom gives you the right to choose. I will not *demand* that you help us. I will *ask* that you help us,” he told them in a strong voice.

“We are free?” one of them asked in an incredulous voice.

“You are free, at least as free as you can be deep in hostile human territory,” Kyven answered. “At the moment, brothers and sisters, that freedom comes with a very big anchor tied to your leg. But that’s something we’ll discuss later, once I have all of you together and we can explain what it is we’re doing. For now, let’s go down to the supplies and get them sorted out, then we’ll be splitting into four groups and spreading out to free the Arcans in the shanty towns. Once they’re all free, we’ll regroup well away from the burning village so we can explain what’s going on to you, so you can make an informed decision about what you want to do.”

“I will carry the world for you, Shaman,” one very young ferret called, adulation in his fire-reflecting eyes.

“I only ask that you carry what you can, little brother,” Kyven said, stepping up and patting him on the shoulder, his eyes warm and his expression gentle, nurturing, a diametric opposite of the ruthlessness they saw in his face just moments before. “A man who carries the entire world on his shoulders learns quickly that he has nowhere to go with it.”

The ferret gave him a long, searching look, then his eyes widened in comprehension.

“Let’s go, brothers and sisters. The night is halfway done, and there’s much more we have to do.”

It took them nearly three hours to get everything organized, as they packed up everything they carry then split the 39 Arcans into four groups, each going with a Shaman. Kyven knelt with his brother and sisters and nannies around an illusory map, showing them layout of the plantation, then they devised the most efficient way to free all 17 shanty towns spread out over nearly 20 square minars of territory, with a total combined population of nearly 1,000 Arcans.

The beginnings of Kyven’s army, and the biggest reason he decided to start here.

Kyven marched away from the still-burning village with his nannies, his monster companions, and six other house Arcans, leaving the humans still huddled in the center of the village to begin their penance of starvation and misery. He walked with them towards the first shanty town, explaining to them exactly who he was and what they were doing, telling them bluntly that their ultimate objective was to free *every single enslaved Arcan* on the continent through armed intervention, though he didn't tell them of his plans to shatter the entirety of human civilization. They weren't quite ready for that yet.

But they weren't dumb. The little mouse house Arcan he'd noticed from before, she pieced it together quickly. "But if we free all the Arcans by force, won't it make the humans fall into ruin?" she asked.

"Of course it will, but you have to ask yourself, little sister, don't they deserve it?" he asked simply.

She gave him a long look. "Yes," she declared.

"Then you understand things perfectly," Kyven told her. "For centuries, the spirits tried to find some way to end Arcan slavery peacefully. Well, that time is past. Now the spirits have bade us to free the Arcans by any means necessary, and we will do exactly that. While our brother and sister Shaman fight the human armies to the north, the four of us have come here to start an Arcan rebellion that will sweep across the entirety of Noraam. We'll attack every plantation, farm, and human town from here to the northern tip of Menn, from the east to the west. When we're done, there won't be a single Arcan in a collar anywhere on this side of the Smoke Mountains, and if the only way we can do it is to leave smoking ruins behind us, then so be it. Just remember what they've done to your brothers and sisters over the years before you give them more pity than they deserve, little sister. *Only* when every Arcan is free and away from human lands will we show pity on them, when they have no more hold over your people. Until that moment, my young friends, the humans are our enemies, and they will receive no mercy from us."

“But *you’re* human,” the willowy male cat with him blurted.

“Not all humans agree with what the rest of us have done, that’s what started the Masked,” he answered. “Though many of them will turn against us when they see what we’re doing. I’m going to lose many friends, but it can’t be helped,” he sighed. “The spirits have spoken, and the Shaman obey.”

“I’m just glad I lived to see this day,” the oldest of the six Arcans with him, an aged feline male, declared. “I knew that some day, the spirits would answer our prayers.”

“I know we’re a little late, honored father, but better late than never,” Kyven said lightly. “But this is just the beginning, not the end. This is where it *begins*. It’s up to you if you want to be with me to see it *end*.”

“Spirits give me strength, I will,” he declared. “I would fight to free my people from slavery, honored Shaman.”

“With all due respect, honored father, leave the fighting to the younger Arcans,” Kyven said, looking back at him with a smile. “They need you for the wisdom of your experience, not for your ability to shoot a musket.”

“Don’t sell an old male to the butcher quite yet, young buck,” he protested, which made a couple of the young house Arcans smile or giggle. “I don’t need to be as young as you to do my part.”

“If you want to help, honored father, you can be there to guide the young ones,” Kyven told him. “This will be a chaotic time for both the humans and the Arcans, and the young ones will need the guidance of their elders. You can best help by being that guiding hand, honored father.”

“Well now, someone finally appreciates the wisdom of experience,” the male cat said with a bit of pride in his voice.

“More than you know, honored father,” Kyven told them as the first of the shanty towns emerged from the dark gloom in the distance. As Kyven expected, most of them were awake, looking towards the burning village,

but their collars prevented them from leaving the boundaries of their shanty town. “Sirra, Dauro, wait here. Vasha, you too,” he called over his shoulder. “You three might scare the Arcans. Listen for my whistle, I’ll call you in when it’s good.”

Vasha gave an annoyed little snort, but she did stop where she was as the two Lupans sat down patiently.

“Are those *monsters*, Shaman?” the little mouse asked, looking over her shoulder at them.

“Yes, little one,” he replied. “They’re all very old friends of mine, but I don’t own them. They travel with me because we’re like family to each other. They may look scary, but they’re actually not.”

“They scare *me*,” a young raccoon said nervously. “I saw them rip a man apart.”

“Which they would never do to *you*,” Kyven said pointedly.

Kyven approached a large throng of about 50 Arcans, gathered at the very edge of the boundary of their shanty town, the closest they could get to see the flickering light in the distance without their collars activating. “Who leads this shanty town?” Kyven shouted as he approached.

A grizzled canine female stepped forward, at least as much as she could. “I do, Master.”

“Never call me Master,” Kyven said immediately. “I am a Shaman, friends, sent by the spirits. I’m here to free you from your collars.”

“But you’re *human!*” one of the Arcans protested.

They all gasped when Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits, causing the gloom of the night to flare with sudden illumination as his eyes shifted to look upon a different kind of light. The bodies of the Arcans and the grass upon which they stood all but glowed to his enhanced vision, the light of their life energy revealed to his eyes. “Humans can be Shaman, and we serve the spirits as faithfully as our Arcan brothers and sisters,” he declared.

“There are four Shaman here on the plantation, and we’re here to free you from your collars, my friends. But as that fire back there tells you, we don’t have much time before the humans from Parai come to investigate. I’m going to take off your collars, then we’re going to move on to the next shanty town and free your other brothers and sisters. We have to visit four of the shanty towns before we can leave, my brother and sister Shaman are going to the others to free them. Then we’re all going to regroup so we can explain everything to you. Does everyone understand?”

“But, but the overseers—“ one of them called, which Kyven cut off.

“Are dead,” he called strongly. “Tell them, brother,” he added, motioning to the older cat.

“We saw it,” he affirmed. “The four Shaman attacked the overseers and killed every single one of them, then burned down the village, even burned down the Master’s plantation house. They’re here to free us, youngsters. Look, I’ve got no collar on,” he declared, patting his neck.

They all stared at him, then two Arcans began to weep. “You saw this, Old Sam?” the female asked him.

“Saw it plain as day,” he nodded. “The Shaman killed all the overseers. Every single one of ‘em.”

“I...I can’t believe it,” she breathed, touching her chest with her hand.

“Believe it, sister,” Kyven said, stepping up to her. He took hold of her collar and allowed the crystal to bleed off into him, causing the collar to go dormant, and he pulled it off her neck with a sharp tug. He held it before her, let her see it, then he threw it over his shoulder like so much garbage. “The Shaman are here to free you, but we don’t have all night to sit here and talk about it. So everyone line up so I can take off your collars. Once I’ve got your collar off, go back to your hut and gather up anything you can easily carry, especially any food or waterskins or canteens you have and a bedroll for sleeping, then come back out here. I’ll try to explain things as we move to the next shanty town.”

It took him only about fifteen minutes to free all the Arcans, and he called in his monster companions as they gathered up their things...and that showed him who was going to be easy to manage and who wasn't. Some of them were obviously excited and eager, but more than few of them looked confused, fearful, constantly touching their bare necks because they were so *used* to the collar being there, and also used to everything that collar represented. But the slave mentality in them made them obey a human, and they dutifully gathered up their things and joined the more eager Arcans just outside the shanty town. Kyven constantly reassured them with gentle words, calmed them down when the Lupans and Equar trotted out of the darkness, then gathered them into a group and had them walk with him towards the next shanty town.

As they walked, Kyven repeated what he'd told the original six, telling them who he was and what they were doing, telling them that they were the first to be freed in what would be a campaign across all of Noraam...and he pretended not to notice when a scared-looking rabbit Arcan dawdled more and more, until she was at the very back of the group, then she stopped and let the others walk away. Kyven put out a hand to stop Sirra from chasing her down when she turned and bolted towards the burning village, running to her masters to warn them of Kyven's intention. Sirra wasn't the only one that noticed her, though. Several Arcans moved to give chase, but Kyven stopped them. "Let her go," he said softly. "She has the *freedom* to make that choice."

"But she'll warn the overseers!" a young dog protested.

"The overseers are all dead and their village is burning," Kyven replied. "Who else is she going to warn that can stop us? By the time she does find someone, the humans are going to know what happened here anyway. Either way, she can't stop us. Just leave her be. Trust me, friends, when we attack Parai and free the Arcans there, she'll be right there among them in another collar, and she might rethink her decision for how they treated her after she showed them loyalty they don't deserve. And when we do free her with the others, none of you should turn your back on her. Sometimes we have to fall down before we can walk."

That made them quiet down, lost in thought at his words.

He *needed* at least one of them to do it. He *needed* word of what he was doing to spread from this place. If the humans in the village heard him monologue out all his intentions like a corny villain from a half-chit dreadful novel, they wouldn't believe it. But to hear of Kyven's intent from an Arcan that heard him explain it to the Arcans he freed, someone that was *right there*, that was the source which they wouldn't discount. It was guile and deceit salted with a dash of truth, meant to force the armies fighting his brothers and sisters in the north to return to their home kingdoms to stop him, and that would free up his Danna and his friends to pull back beyond the Smoke Mountains safely, without the entire combined armies of the twelve kingdoms harrying their every step. That rabbit was serving Kyven's purpose, even if she was doing what she was conditioned to do.

The rabbit wasn't the only one so conditioned to the slave mentality that they were afraid of what was going on, afraid of the idea of *freedom*, but she was the only one brave enough to actively turn against the other Arcans and seek out her masters. There were more conditioned Arcans mixed in with the more enthusiastic ones in the other three shanty towns Kyven visited with his ever-expanding troop of freed Arcans, until he had nearly 300 former slaves behind him as he headed for the rendezvous point, on the northwestern corner of the plantation, well out of sight of anyone that might come from Parai to investigate the smoke rising from the plantation that would be visible with the dawn. He got them all settled down and got them to rest a bit, eat a little from the stores they'd raided. As dawn crept up on the eastern horizon, he saw Stalker coming in with his freed Arcans, nearly 200 of them. Kyven took the larger wolf's wrist in greeting. "Brother, any trouble?" he asked.

"None," he replied. "Dancer is not far behind us, and Clover should be here soon. She had the furthest to go."

"Good news. Let's get our brothers and sisters a little rest and some food."

By the time the sun was over the trees to the east, all four Shaman had arrived, and with them some 907 Arcans. They sat in a large group as the four Shaman stood at the front of them, then Kyven once again explained their intent. He went into a little more detail as they listened, explaining that they would be the point of the blade that cut the collars off the necks of every Arcan in Noraam. “What this means for you, brothers and sisters, is that you now have a choice to make,” he told them in a strong voice. “We Shaman aren’t going to *force* you to do anything. You are free Arcans now, and this is the first decision you have to make as free men and women. We’re going to have to *fight* the humans to free the Arcans from slavery, friends. That means that all of you need to decide if that’s a fight you’re willing to take up. You don’t *have* to fight. You can simply stay with us and we’ll do our best to get you out of human lands.

“Understand, friends, that taking up this burden carries risk. If you decide to fight, then I will tell you here and now that not all of you will live to see Haven,” he warned in a sober voice. “And there will be times when I will ask you to do terrible things, because they *must* be done, no matter how much you or we may despise it.”

“Like what?” someone called.

“When we reach Alamar, we will burn the entire kingdom to the ground and exterminate the entire Alamari people, to the last man, woman, and *child*,” he answered grimly. “Because it *must* be done. The Alamari are the one people of Noraam whose entire society and economy absolutely depends on Arcan slavery, far more than any other. To break the cycle of slavery, I hate to say, we must completely destroy the foundation of that slavery, we must completely eradicate the one society on Noraam that so completely depends on slavery that they will *never* accept the idea that the age of slavery is over and the Arcans are a free people. And that is Alamar. When we march out of Alamar, there won’t be anything that walks on two legs left alive behind us,” he proclaimed in a reluctant yet resolute voice. “That’s a terrible, terrible thing to do, but in this case, if the Arcans ever want to be truly free of the collar, it absolutely has to be done. Believe me, friends, none of us want to do it, but a Shaman does what must be done,

regardless of our own feelings about it. I understand completely if many of you, or even all of you, cannot find it in yourself to do something like that, something that *monstrous*. I won't think any less of you, just as I won't think any less of those who *can* find the capacity to commit such an act within themselves. We do what must be done. No more, no less.

“That is a choice you have to make for yourself, but that's not a choice that you have to make right now. But the choice you do need to make, and very soon, is if you want to fight. Those who want to fight, can fight. We'll give you weapons and teach you the ways of fighting as best we can while on the move. Those of you who don't want to fight, that is your choice, and we will honor it. You will stay with us, and we will protect you as we move through human territory. Those who decide not to fight can help us by hunting and foraging for food, learning how to repair the equipment we'll need for our campaign, and even something as simple as carrying supplies as we move so the warriors among us aren't worn out by the extra weight. That keeps our fighters fresh and ready at any moment.. Once we reach the Free Territories, I've planned things out those who don't want to fight to go on to Haven, the hidden Arcan nation far to the west, where you will be free and never fear a slave's collar again,” he said in a powerful voice, which made several Arcans gape at him.

“There's one other choice available to you, friends. If you decide to get up and walk away from us here and now and take your chances by yourself out there, then that too is your choice. None of us will try to stop you. That is your right as free people. But I would *ask* that you please stay with us,” he said gently. “With us, you will have protection and as much safety as we can offer you. Out there, on your own, you are in far greater danger than you would be with us, and there's a very big risk of you being captured and enslaved again *behind* us, where we can't save you. That's if the Flaurens don't kill you on the spot in retribution for what the rest of us are doing. Understand that risk, friends, before you make that decision, and think very carefully about it. I won't stop you, but I suggest in the strongest possible terms that you are safest here, even if you don't agree with what we're doing.

“There are a few things I need to ask you,” he said. “Who here speaks the Noravi language?” Several dozen of them raised their hands. “Any of you speak Hammish or Amishar?” Just two raised their hands. “Anyone here speak Cajar?” Several raised their hands. “Those of you who speak Noravi, congratulations, you just became teachers,” he chuckled. “It’s important that everyone here at least understand some basic Noravi words and phrases for when we cross into Georvan, and we start adding Arcans that don’t speak Flauren. I’ll be gathering up the Noravi speakers later to explain what must be done.”

“What’s going to happen today is that we’re going to move into the pine forests to the west of Parai and organize ourselves, a place where the trees will give us concealment,” he told them. “If you decide you want to fight, you’ll be given a weapon and taught the basics of how it works. If you decide you don’t want to fight, we’ll organize you into groups that will have basic chores and tasks to support those of us who do. Field Arcans, I ask you to help the house Arcans, they’re not used to walking long distances the way you are, so they’re going to tire faster than we will. And listen to them, they have experience with many things you don’t that will be useful to us in the times to come,” he warned. “The skills they learned cleaning houses and doing chores for the humans will make them invaluable members of our group once we get things organized. You’ll see what I mean once you see it in action,” he smiled. “Now, let’s get moving. Everyone finish your snacks and refill your waterskins in the stream and be ready to move in ten minutes,” he called.

It took them nearly four hours to get to the campsite they’d found coming down, a large natural clearing in the pine forest about ten minars west of Parai. There was little doubt in Kyven’s mind that the townsfolk had seen the smoke to the south and several people had gone to investigate, which meant that very soon, search parties would be hunting for the escaped Arcans, or at the very least, trying to find their trail to report it to the local army garrison. There was a garrison of 100 soldiers in Parai, who didn’t take their job as defenders of the town all that seriously. It was a posh assignment in the Flauren army, where the soldiers basically just did maybe

two hours of drill in the morning, then spent the rest of the day lounging about, drinking ale, and chasing women. Added to the city watch of 50 men and a standing informal militia of about 200 more, that gave the town a respectable force they could call upon for defense if attacked.

Which was why Kyven was going to draw them out of Parai and slaughter them among the pine trees, then sack Parai and burn it to the ground.

“This is it,” Kyven called. “Brother, sisters, nannies, let’s get our friends settled in and get them some rest. We’re going to be here for at least a day,” he called. “Anyone who has decided they want to fight against the humans, go to Ebony and Stalker, the tall black wolves over there,” he ordered, pointing. “Ebony will give you a weapon and show you how to use it. Stalker will show those who want to fight where to put their things so our fighters are protecting the rest of us in case of a surprise attack. Those of you who don’t want to fight, report to Dancer, the red vixen right there. She’ll be assigning you jobs you can do to support the group, things you’ll find aren’t very hard at all. And I need some fast, quiet Arcans good at sneaking around to act as scouts,” he continued. “Be warned, though, being a scout is a very dangerous job, so think carefully before you volunteer. It’s one of the most dangerous and most important jobs in a moving army, because it’s the scouts that keep us from being surprised by human attackers. Those of you who think you have what it takes to scout, report to Fastpaw, the tall spotted cat right there. He’s the leader of the scouts, and he will show you what you’ll be doing. Remember, scouts need to be quick, they need to be silent, and they need to be observant. Your eyes are what protects us from being surprised,” he reminded.

Kyven acted as if he wasn’t paying much attention, but he was pleasantly surprised to see just over half of the Arcan host almost bull rush Stalker and Ebony, and he was just as pleasantly surprised to see nearly two dozen younger Arcans scurry over to Fastpaw, including the little female mouse house Arcan. That sight reinforced his belief that despite a thousand years of slavery, the Arcan spirit had not been crushed. These Arcans who

had lived their entire lives in bondage were willing to fight, to strike back against their oppressors.

Clover mirrored his observation, standing beside him as he tended Vasha's hooves, cleaning them with a hoof pick. Vasha rather liked it when Kyven did that, so she didn't once try to knock him down. Sirra and Dauro dozed in the shade of a nearby pine tree, staying relatively close to him and Vasha and away from the Arcans. "Over half," she said quietly. "More than I expected."

"We'll see how they hold up when they're actually fighting," Kyven said. "But yeah, more than I expected. It gives me hope in what's coming if we can get half the Arcans we free to fight with us. By the time we reach Tallasar, our fighting Arcans will outnumber the army garrison there by ten to one."

"You think so?"

"Just do the math, sister," he said evenly. "By the time we reach Tallasar, we'll have freed maybe a hundred thousand Arcans. If half of them fight, that's fifty thousand, against a city garrison and emergency militia of maybe ten thousand. With the vast majority of the Flauren army attacking Atan, it leaves Flaur vulnerable. I figure that by the time we reach Orlann, we'll have so many Arcans that we can just sweep everything out of our path by sheer force of numbers alone, if it comes down to it. I'd rather not do it that way, it'll get people killed, but it will be *possible* if necessary. I want as many of these Arcans as possible to live to see Haven," he declared with powerful conviction.

"You think there are that many Arcans in Flaur?"

"*Easily*," he said with a snort. "An average plantation has twenty Arcans. Some have more, some have less, but it averages out to about twenty. The average town will have one Arcan for every three people, give or take, and the average town in Flaur has about two thousand people in it. There are at least a hundred plantations in every Flauren parish, and there are twenty-six parishes. There are forty-four towns in Flaur, including the

major cities of Tallasar, Orlann, Pensora, and Jaksille. If we attack the right towns in the right order and sack the plantations along the way, we'll easily have a hundred thousand Arcans behind us when we reach Tallasar. Mind, sister, I'm not even taking into account the Arcans we'll find in isolated farmsteads and small villages, so I'm being conservative with my estimates."

"You're right," she nodded after thinking a moment.

"That's why I decided to attack here first, because there were so many Arcans in King's Garden. It gave us the largest number of easy to free Arcans in the shortest time with the least risk, and it also happens to be the southernmost plantation in Flaur, so we don't have to go in circles," he chuckled. "We have enough fighters here to sack Parai, at least after we lure out their garrison and slaughter them. Then the Arcans get to pay the humans back for a thousand years of torture and cruelty."

"You have truly thought this through, brother," she said with a nod and a smile at him.

"I've had a lot of time to plan this out," he replied. "And since I can shadow walk, it let me get a good look at things before we began so I could see the layout of things."

By sunset, the camp was well organized. Dancer had done well setting up the noncombatants into jobs, from pack bearers to hunters to cooks to launderers to tailors, for she knew what an army needed from her long talks with Danvers. Roles often performed by camp followers were assigned to the non-combatants, and it was then that the skills of the house Arcans came into the spotlight. They knew how to manage a house, and they found themselves in leadership roles for the non-combatants, running the camp like they would a household. They would be making sure everyone ate, their clothes were in good repair, and they had what they needed. While Dancer organized the camp workers, Stalker and Ebony started with the basics of fighting for the soldiers. They handed out muskets to those Ebony felt would best use them, then they handed out the other weapons and farm

implements as makeshift weaponry. Ebony then gave the soldiers their very first drill in how to swing a hoe as a weapon instead of a farm tool, how to use a pitchfork like a spear. They then taught them the most basic of battle commands, to advance, to hold fast, to take cover, to attack, to retreat. Stalker explained the basics of tactics to them afterward, explaining that the Arcans would primarily be fighting at night when the humans couldn't see, that they would be fighting primarily from ambush, to attack out of nowhere and crush the enemy before they could organize a response. But he did warn that there would be time that they would be attacking towns and villages when ambush wasn't going to be the bet strategy.

And he too warned the soldiers that some of them *would* die.

But many of them had no problem with that. To die in a manner of one's own choosing, to die well, was one of the few things to which an Arcan could aspire. Many of the Arcans that pondered their own mortality only hoped that their deaths brought about freedom for the rest.

That was the definition of *noble* in Kyven's opinion.

By nightfall, Fastpaw led out his neophyte scouts for their first training mission, having received Kyven's orders just before deploying; to look for any sign of organized human response or search parties, then report back their location to the camp. The 23 Arcans that volunteered for scouting were ultimately accepted by Fastpaw, who was the leader of the scouts in the fledgling army. Fastpaw had proven to be an outstanding scout...not as good as Lightfoot, but even coming *close* to being as good as Lightfoot in nearly anything was itself a testament of skill. It was Fastpaw who tested them in their ability to move quickly and quietly during the day, as well as seeing how well they could hide. Hiding was a critical skill for a scout. Most of the scouts were also climbers, but those who couldn't climb did acquit themselves nicely when it came to hiding.

As the Arcans rested around small, sheltered campfires, Kyven waited for Fastpaw's first report. The humans would keep looking for the missing Arcans, but the number of Arcans who had run away and just who and what

had freed them would cause them to be cautious, to send out scouts of their own to find the Arcans and then report back. But he was positive that by now, Parai knew that King's Garden had been attacked and sacked and all of the Arcans freed, and the survivors were telling their horror stories to the town leaders about the brutality of the attack initiated by four Shaman. The fact that there were four Shaman running around would make the town leaders of Parai very cautious, but it also spur them into hunting down the runaway Arcans quickly, because they would correctly guess that the Shaman were with the freed Arcans. Find the Arcans, and they'd find the Shaman. And when they found the Shaman, they'd attack in force to kill them, and most likely slaughter the entire host of freed Arcans just to make absolutely sure they killed those Shaman.

He knew they would come, because they wouldn't expect Arcan slaves to fight back. They would expect sporadic and disorganized resistance from a few of the more energetic Arcans and definite resistance from the Shaman, but would not expect the Arcans to attack in an organized manner in large numbers. They would not even conceive that such a thing was possible, much like how the Chestoners were utterly dismissive of the Arcan army that ultimately took their city. Even knowing that there were four times as many Arcans as human soldiers, they would still come because their arrogance would not let them see most of those Arcans as a threat.

Ebony woke him from a light nap around midnight. "Fastpaw is back, Shaman," she reported.

"About time," he said, sitting up. his bedroll was laid out in the open night air, close to one of the small fires. The tall, sleek spotted cat came up to him and knelt by his bedroll. "What's going on out there, Fastpaw?"

"The humans are trying to find us," he answered. "I've let one of the patrols get just close enough to see the campfires and then scared them away, like you told me to. I also went back to the plantation to see what was going on there, and the town humans were swarming all over the place. They freed the humans we collared and took them back to Parai."

“Just as I expected,” he nodded. “How long do you estimate it’ll take the humans to organize their attackers?”

“Not long, most of them are on horseback,” he replied. “I scouted the edge of Parai, and they’re gathering up their men in the town square. I counted at least two hundred horses.”

“Most of their fighting force,” Kyven noted. “We can wipe them out in the woods and leave Parai open for sacking.”

“They won’t move until daylight,” Fastpaw said.

“And that’s why they’re going to die,” he replied. “Scout out what you think are the most likely routes they’ll take to reach the camp, report that to Striker, then go keep an eye on them. Report back when they’re about to move. I’ll have Stalker and Ebony get our new army ready for their first battle.”

Fastpaw nodded and stood up.

“How are the kids?”

“As loud as a thunderstorm right now, but they’ll get the hang of it,” he replied, which made Kyven chuckle.

Kyven passed that along to Striker and Ebony and let them organize the response while Kyven napped, then Fastpaw woke him up again just before dawn. “They’re about to move,” he said quietly. “They’re taking the path I showed Striker in, they already have two men on horseback scouting out the path.”

“Alright, let’s get this done,” he replied as he stood up. Ebony quietly handed him his gunbelt, and he buckled it on.

Kyven gathered the fighting Arcans around him, and many of them gasped when he created a large illusory map in the air behind him. “This is it, friends. The humans are coming, and we’re going to ambush them and wipe them out,” he declared. “They’re going to come up this game trail, which is just big enough for their horses. They’ll be in single file, and they

won't have much room to maneuver on horseback. That's what we're going to use against them to kill them," he replied. "There are about two hundred of them and five hundred of us, so we have the advantage. They're not going to *expect* us to take the initiative and attack them *first*," he told them in a strong voice. "Now, this is what we're going to do.

"We're going to lay in wait for them along the treeline just out of their sight here and here," he said, highlighting the areas with colored light. "We'll allow the humans to ride between us, and when they're fully between us, that's when our musket bearers will open fire. You'll only get one shot each, so what you're going to do is fire in a staggered pattern that will make them think that there are many more muskets shooting at them," he said. "The Shaman will also attack them, to panic them and goad them into being rash. I'm going to enhance the chaos with illusions that will make them believe that even more, that they're completely surrounded on all sides by musket wielders. I'll add some illusions of Arcans breaking cover, giving them targets to shoot at. And if we do it right, they'll be so confused and afraid by then that they'll shoot at anything that moves. *That's* what we'll be waiting for," he stressed. "Most of them are going to be carrying two muskets, and perhaps a pistol. It's standard Flauren procedure for cavalry to carry two muskets, one on each side of their saddleskirt, so we'll assume that those men will copy that practice. We wait until most of them fire two shots each, then we attack them. It's important that all of you stay completely under cover until the attack order is given," he stressed. "If they see you, they'll try to kill you. You wait for the signal, then charge them and kill them. Try not to damage their muskets, we're going to need them. Every musket we capture is another gun *we* can use," he said pointedly. "Stalker, you give the order when you feel they've used up their shots. Don't let them reload."

"Easily done, brother."

"Does everyone understand? Any questions?" When they were all silent a moment, he dismissed the illusion. "The Shaman and our three helpers will show you where to hide when we get there, and Stalker will organize the firing line. Remember, stay under cover, remain quiet, wait for

Stalker to give the order, then attack. If we do this right, it'll be over fast and we minimize our own casualties. Alright, let's get our gear and get moving," he declared.

Kyven led the Arcans into the woods, then he, the Shaman, and the nannies got their fighters into position. Kyven set Arcans along the trees about fifty rods back from the game trail, giving them just hints of a view of the trail while still putting so many trees in the way that no human would get a good shot at them, even when they were charging to attack. The Arcans would have to weave between the trees to reach the humans, and that would give them cover from incoming musket fire. Stalker set the musket bearers a little closer, putting each one in a place where they could take cover behind a tree before and after firing and putting at least one more tree between them and their targets, further hindering vision and protecting the shooters on *both* sides. The Arcan musketeers weren't there to shoot the humans, they were there to scare them into using up their shots. Stalker organized their firing pattern, where each Arcan would watch the Arcan to his right. When that Arcan fired, then he would count two three and fire himself. That would create a cascading, constant chatter of musket fire that would reinforce the illusions Kyven would use against them. The Shaman would also be attacking with magic, which would further incite the humans into panicking.

They got into position in a shockingly fast amount of time, given that most of them were complete beginners at being a soldier. The Arcans did understand the basic commands and idea of the attack, and they all stayed hidden behind trees and behind fallen logs, their fur helping them blend in with their surroundings, and quite a few tails were tucked between legs or put under a leg to keep them from straying. Kyven took up a position at the vanguard, with Striker on one side and Ebony on the other, in view of Stalker's position. Stalker waved to him to tell him the gunners were ready, and he nodded and gave a signal to Fastpaw. The tall cat bounded on silent feet down the trail, quickly running out of sight. When Fastpaw returned, the humans would be just behind him.

Ten minutes later, before the Arcans could stew very long about the upcoming fight, Fastpaw raced back down the path. He all but slid to a stop by Kyven's tree. "Five minutes," he said quietly.

"Five minutes, pass it down the line!" Kyven hissed to Stalker, who nodded and turned to tell the first of the gunners. He waved to Clover and Dancer, and they nodded and hurried to the other end of the skirmish line, to seal in the humans and prevent any of them from escaping.

Moments later, he heard the first of them. A rider walked a horse quietly and carefully along the path, and behind him were a line of horses. Many men were ducking almost constantly to get under the lower branches, and they were moving with caution.

"How much further, Virino?" the man behind the point said in a hushed tone. That man wore the uniform of a Flauren soldier, though it was a bit dirty and not in very good repair.

"Maybe another minar," the man in front replied, their voices barely audible.

"I don't like this, Lieutenant," the man behind the second said. "This trail is too narrow for us to maneuver."

"We'll have plenty of open space, the Arcans are camped in Goldgrass Meadow, Sergeant," he replied. "Remember, shoot at any Arcan with glowing eyes. Those are the Shaman. The rest of them will scatter as soon as we charge."

Just as Kyven expected. He silently drew one of his Colt pistols, a relic of the Great Ancients, then made a gesture at Stalker. He nodded and waved at the first of the firing line, holding his clenched fist in the air. Kyven felt the coolness wash over him as he slipped around his tree and advanced, his body shimmering into the illusion of a yearling deer, with the spots still on its sides and grazing on a short shrub by the edge of the trail. Kyven had the illusion look in curiosity as the horse approached, standing in the center of the trail, and it stayed there until the horse and rider were almost on top of

him. “Shoo,” the point man said in a quiet tone, making a fast motion with his hand.

He toppled out of his saddle after Kyven shot him in the face with his pistol, the loud gunshot making the horse flinch. Stalker snapped his fist down, and the Arcans started firing. Kyven channeled an illusion of a hundred muskets all firing at the same time and made it reach all the way down the line of two hundred horses, draining his strength significantly due to the sheer size of the illusion, even if it only carried a sound component. Illusions of only a sound or a small or a still image were the easiest to create. The men started shouting, bringing up their muskets but seeing nothing, though several did fire at the plumes of musket smoke they saw between the trees as the Arcans fired their muskets. He saw four men fall out of their saddles as the neophyte gunners actually hit what they were aiming at, then an intense bolt of lightning shattered the air and literally blew a horse to pieces, making it explode in an eruption of blood, gore, and arcs of electricity. “Shaman!” one of the humans screamed in fear, sawing the reins of his spooked horse to keep it from bolting. Kyven started channeling an illusion that created shadowy shapes moving between the trees as he started running past the line, behind the line of musket bearers to keep from getting shot by them, his own form hidden under an illusion of a rabbit while the illusory shapes he created on both sides of the line of horses were well ahead of him.

The soldiers took the bait. Dozens of shots raked through the trees, leaving smoking trails as they started firing at the movement they could see, as well as some just firing blindly into the treeline as thunderous musket shots continued to echo off the trees. Thunderclaps from lightning boomed from both ends of the line of horses, and as Kyven reached the middle of the line, he drew up and lunged behind a tree as a wild musket shot nearly took his ear off, sharing the cover with a thin, wiry looking raccoon female holding her smoking musket. She’d fired her shot and was waiting, just as she was told. She couldn’t see him since he was in the illusion of a rabbit. Kyven dismissed the illusion to save his energy, nearly startling the raccoon into breaking cover, but he put a firm hand on her arm and kept her behind

the tree as he focused on the illusions of shadowy shapes and musket shots. He started to sweat as he maintained the illusions, had the shapes continue to move down the line behind the firing line to protect the musket bearers, but the still form of an Arcan just down from the raccoon, a musket laying on the ground beside him, showed him that not every Arcan was leaving this place alive. The dog had been shot while making his own shot. Kyven darted up to that tree and dragged the dog behind it, but the glazed eyes made that an exercise in futility. He was already dead.

After moments of steady fire from the soldiers, Stalker gave the order. "Attack!" his magically augmented voice boomed across the forest. Kyven responded to that with his most demanding illusion, creating an illusion of total darkness that covered as much of the horse train as he could possibly manage, but *only* the humans could see. It didn't affect the horses or anything else, just the humans. They screamed in fear and started firing truly wildly into what for them was total darkness, one man turned his horse and spurred it to run, but was promptly clotheslined by a branch he couldn't see, swept off his mount to land crushing on the back of shoulders and back of his head. The Arcans jumped up from behind logs and from around trees and charged, moving with tremendous speed as they brandished their farm tools and hammers and clubs, with only a few carrying any real weaponry...but they wouldn't need it. Kyven's illusion of darkness let the vast majority of them reach the soldiers, and when they got that close, the true advantages of the Arcans were revealed.

It was a short, ugly fight, and it was completely one-sided. Kyven could only hold an illusion like that for a short moment, but that was all it took to let the Arcans get to the humans without impediment. Men screamed and flailed as they were systematically hacked and beaten to death by Arcans whose muscles were hardened from an entire lifetime of heavy labor. They were yanked out of their saddles, and when they could finally see again, most of them were on the ground and already had two or three Arcans pounding on them with farm tools. Kyven watched with exhausted eyes as a large bull Arcan stabbed an already dead man over and over with a pitchfork, his eyes almost wild from fury as he stabbed and

stabbed and stabbed, and he saw two Arcans chase down a terrified man who tried to flee, only to run right into one of the musket bearers who was moving up to join the fight. The stock of the musket shattered the man's teeth when the willowy gray fox Arcan male struck him in the face with it, and he staggered back only to be brained by the pick wielded by the large canine Arcane that came up behind him. Sporadic gunfire echoed up and down the line, with screams of rage, shrieks of the wounded, and the moans of the dying. The smell of blood filled the air, making the already skittish horses scatter. Kyven finally felt recovered enough to get back into the fight, drawing both his pistols and moving out from behind the tree. He shot four men that tried to escape, one of them missing his left arm below the elbow from a wood axe, then created a whip of solid shadow and grabbed a pistol from a man who tried to level it at the two small tawny-furred canine Arcans swinging hoes at him, yanking it to the side, then the two small dogs drove him to the ground and systematically hacked him to death with the metal edges of their farm tools.

After a few more chaotic moments, things slowed to a stop. The last of the men who tried to run was chased down by the faster Arcans and killed, and there were no more humans left alive. "See to the wounded as fast as you can, put presses over any bleeding and wait for the Shaman to come to heal them! Anyone who can walk, help them back to the campsite!" Kyven barked, waving his hands. "Strip the human dead of their guns, shot and powder, and anything else useful! Round up the horses, we can use those! Quickly, quickly!" he ordered, making a circle with his hand over his head. "Fastpaw! Fastpaw, scout the trail, the shooting might have attracted more soldiers!"

There were some strange expressions among the Arcans as they collected up anything useful they could find and tended to the wounded and the dead among them. Kyven carried the dead gunner over his shoulder as Dancer moved from Arcan to Arcan, using her healing magic to heal several gunshot wounds and a few slash and stab wounds from knives. She went behind Kyven and checked the Arcan over his shoulder, then gave him a wan look when she came back around. "How many?" he asked.

“Nine,” she replied. “At least that I know of,” she added. “Whatever you did worked, brother. Some of the humans just looked around as if something had jumped on their backs just as we charged.”

“They were at the edge of my illusion,” he told her. “I made it pitch black for the soldiers, but the illusion could only be seen from their point of view.”

“Ah. Ahhhh, clever,” she said with an approving nod.

“What happened with the ones that weren’t blinded?”

“Most of them had used up their shots,” she told him. “We got to them before they could reload. Most of the injuries were from swords and knives.”

“Then it worked,” he nodded, shifting the dead Arcan on his shoulder. “I’m going to carry this one back to camp, sister, I need to rest. Those illusions drained me,” he told her.

“Then you shouldn’t be carrying our honored brother,” she said, grabbing the shoulder of a burly bull Arcan, the one with the pitchfork. “The Shaman needs your help, my large brother. Carry our fallen brother back to camp for him.”

“I will, Shaman,” he said in a deep voice, shifting his hooved feet. Kyven allowed him to take the young Arcan off his shoulder, revealing a large bloodstain saturating the shirt on most of Kyven’s shoulder and upper back.

“Dancer, take over here. Get everything gathered and pull them back to camp as soon as you can. We only have about four hours before the rest of the soldiers come looking for the ones we killed.”

“I will, brother,” she nodded.

He trudged back to camp feeling the exertion of using so many large illusions in rapid succession, almost panting by the time he reached the camp. Their soldiers were carrying in the supplies taken from the dead,

some were leading horses, and others were helping injured Arcans get back to camp. That aged cat, Old Sam, he was directing the younger Arcans almost like a doctor, checking the Arcans and having the youngers make bandages and treat injuries. “This isn’t a bad injury, friend, a few stitches and you’ll be good as new,” the aged Arcan declared as he checked a laceration on a canine Arcan’s shoulder. “Chops, don’t be afraid to press down on the bandage. That’s what stops the bleeding.”

“You’re turning out to be handy,” Kyven said as the large bull behind him set the dead Arcan on the ground.

“I was owned by a vet before I was sold to a kennel, and ended up being a house Arcan,” he answered as he pressed down on the bandage he had over the shoulder wound. “I guess I led a lucky life, Shaman, I’ve never worked a field a day in my life. The vet that owned me did his work with me around, and I remember most of what he did. The village would often bring hurt Arcans to me before calling in a vet.”

“Congratulations, Old Sam, you just became the army’s medic,” Kyven told him. “I’ll get you some more helpers and you can treat and stabilize the wounds while waiting for the Shaman to have the energy to heal them.”

“Happy to help, Shaman,” he said with a smile. “I would ask if that blood is yours, but you’re not moving like you’re wounded.”

“It’s his,” he said, pointing at the dead Arcan. “You can do me a favor, Old Sam, and arrange a burial detail for our honored fallen. They will *not* be skinned and butchered like cattle,” he said with a scowl.

“I’ll take care of it, Shaman,” Old Sam nodded gravely.

“You’re a good man, Old Sam.”

It turned out that they had twelve dead, and considering they killed 203 men, that was a very lopsided battle. Old Sam did as he promised and saw to the interment of the dead as the survivors, having won their first battle, reacted in different ways. Some were a bit haunted at what had happened, seeing the horrors of war first hand. Some were excited, almost manic in

their victory, having struck a blow against their taskmasters and discovering a strength within themselves they hadn't known was there. Some were pensive and reflective, some acted no differently at all.

Kyven was quite happy with the fact that they'd captured 336 intact and working muskets, and when combined with the muskets they already had, that was nearly a musket for every fighting Arcan. They'd also captured 81 pistols, quite a few swords and knives, and a single alchemical weapon, a shockrod that had belonged to the commander of the soldiers, a weapon he had never gotten the chance to use. He had been one of the first men to die, killed not by a Shaman, but by one of the Arcan musket bearers. They also captured quite a few alchemical lamps, alchemical fire starters, compasses, several maps of the region, and trail rations and lots of canteens, which would be *very* useful to the Arcans. Over half the men had been carrying Flauren soldier's issued gear, and that gear was now going to help them.

Kyven rested with his Lupan friends, using Dauro as a backrest and recuperating after a hefty meal of raw venison that Clover had hunted for him. Sirra laid curled around his feet, and him being nearly encircled by his Lupan companions made many of the Arcans wary to approach him. But he couldn't just sit around, there was too much to do. When he felt strong enough, he got back up and helped Stalker and the nannies teach their soldiers how to load their new muskets, then how to fire them. They didn't have the powder and ammunition to practice more than two shots, but every little bit helped. The Arcans got to fire the muskets twice and reload them three times. "When we capture more ammunition, we'll practice reloading until you can reload your musket in thirty seconds," Striker called, walking up and down the line. "Reloading quickly can be the difference between life and death, brothers and sisters. Until then remember that you only have one shot, so don't waste it. And also remember that your musket is the one piece of equipment that you cannot allow to fall into bad condition. Later on I'll be teaching you how to clean them, even take them apart enough to check for any problems or damage. Until then, keep your muskets and your ammo pouches dry and out of the mud. Alright, brothers and sisters, go get the

next group and go over to the tailors and have them help you adjust the carry straps on the muskets so you can carry them on the move.”

“I knew putting you in charge of teaching how to shoot was best,” Kyven chuckled as he stood by his coyote friend. “You’re a good drill instructor, Striker.”

“We do what we can, Shaman,” he smiled. “I’m surprised you didn’t bring rifles for them.”

“There wouldn’t be enough to go around, and besides, Danna will need them more than we will,” he replied. “She’s up against highly skilled enemy generals. We’ll be coming up against lackadaisical garrisons and militias until the king gets serious about us and dispatches a sizable regiment of his army to deal with us.”

“And after we crush them?”

“He recalls DeVaur to save what’s left of Flaur from us,” Kyven answered. “If I don’t miss my guess, we’ll come up against DeVaur right about the time we sack Tallasar,” he predicted. “The king will go into a complete panic after we burn Orlann to the ground, because by then we’ll only be three weeks away from Tallasar, at least by his thinking. He’ll think we can’t move any faster than a human army can.”

“Something we’ve used well in the past,” Striker chuckled as the next group of trainees started gathering on the firing line.

“That’s when he’ll threaten to execute DeVaur if he doesn’t get his army back to Flaur *fucking now*,” Kyven chuckled. “We’ll beat DeVaur to Tallasar, sack it, kill the king and the Barristas, then face off against him just before we split up the army.”

“And you realize that those plans won’t last a minute after someone makes a decision you don’t expect?” Striker asked lightly as the Arcans waited to be told what to do.

“Naturally, but I learned from Danvers to plan early and adjust them to adapt to changing conditions, it minimizes the running around with your breeches on fire later on.”

Striker laughed. “You have acted like a general, Shaman. You are a good leader,” he said with a smile, putting his hand on Kyven’s shoulder. “Now let’s get these Arcans some practice before lunch.”

Fastpaw kept an eye on Parai over the day, then bounded in on all fours and rose up to get their attention as Kyven and his brother and sister Shaman took a early afternoon meal, as the rest of their freed Arcans continued to recover from the battle and practice with their muskets without actually firing them. Many were practicing loading muskets by loading the spares and the pistols, which had a similar loading technique. “Shaman,” he called, walking quickly up to them after returning to a vertical base. “Ten soldiers just left Parai and are coming this way. I think they’re the search party. They must consider the men we killed to be overdue by now.”

“Later than I expected, they might not get back to Parai before dark by now. Like that’ll matter,” Kyven said. “Brother, sisters, could one of you take a small war party out and kill them for us, please?”

“I’ll do it, brother,” Stalker said immediately with a growing smile of anticipation.

“Fastpaw, go back and keep an eye on them. Report back in when they get about five minars from the battlefield, that’ll give Stalker and the others time to get in position.”

“Wait, where are those talkers we took from the soldiers?” Clover asked. “They were set so they were only two. That way poor Fastpaw doesn’t have to run back and forth all the time,” she smiled at him.

“I don’t mind, Shaman, the running does me good,” he said modestly.

“I know where they are,” Stalker announced. “Come with me, young brother, we’ll get you one and I will carry the other for now.”

“Of course, Shaman,” he said with a nod.

Kyven had all the Arcans rest after they finished their training or finished what they were doing, addressing them just before Stalker left with thirty Arcans to ambush the search party. “We’ll be attacking Parai tonight,” he announced. “We can’t give them time to organize a response. They know their soldiers are overdue, so we have to hit them before they can prepare for us. So everyone rest. Tonight just after sunset, I’ll explain our plan of action to you and we’ll move out. We’ll be hitting Parai just after midnight. By dawn, we’ll be long gone, and there won’t be a building left standing behind us,” he said with a sober look at the assembled Arcans. “We’re going to sack Parai, take everything of value we can carry, scatter the survivors, and burn the town to the ground to deny what we can’t carry to the humans. After we’re done, we’re going to move far faster than the humans ever believe we could,” he told them. “We’ll get so far away they won’t consider that we could get that far away, and *then* we’ll stop to rest. So be ready to go a while without sleep, brothers and sisters. We’re going to be moving all night and nearly a full day before we can stop to rest.”

Not an hour later, as Kyven dozed with the Lupans, Stalker returned, his Arcans leading ten more horses. The wolf Shaman looked quite content, coming over and sitting beside Kyven, ruffling Sirra’s fur on her neck fondly. “Any trouble?”

“Only one minor wound among our brothers and sisters, all the humans are dead,” he replied. “We ambushed them, brother. They only got off one shot in reply.”

“And naturally it hit someone,” Kyven grunted.

“No, the injury was from our brother stepping on a branch and getting a stick through his foot,” he replied.

“Ouch,” Kyven winced. “Well, get your fighters some rest, brother. We’ll be breaking camp and moving three hours before midnight, and that’ll be the beginning of a *very* long day.”

“We can manage. We’ll see how well our brothers and sisters do, though,” he noted. “They don’t have a Shaman’s conditioning.”

Not long after sunset, Ebony roused him, and they started. First he shadow walked over to Parai and studied the town, making sure everything was as he remembered and that his plan would work, then he returned, gathered his friends, and explained his plan thoroughly to them, who would be directing the other Arcans in the attack. They broke down and packed the camp, the non-combatant pack bearers preparing to earn their keep so the fighters wouldn’t be weighed down, and while the pack bearers got everything organized under Clover’s direction, Kyven addressed the fighters. He created an illusory map of Parai, a town of about 1,000 on the coast, a town of whitewashed walls and red tiled roofs.

A doomed city.

Kyven stood in front of his map and motioned at it. “This is Parai,” he called, then caused colored blocks to appear on it. “We’re going to be attacking it at midnight, brothers and sisters. Our plan is a very simple one. Me, Stalker, and Dancer will go in first about an hour before you attack. Our jobs are to kill the night watch, destroy the alarm gongs in their city hall and their garrison barracks to prevent them from alerting the city, secure the garrison armory, and sneak into the houses while the humans are still asleep to pull the collars off their enslaved Arcans and start trying to sneak them out of town. When we’re done, we’ll signal Clover, and she will lead you in the assault. You’ll advance into town from this side,” he said, putting colored lines representing the Arcans on the map. “Your primary objectives will be the garrison armory, town hall, and the docks.” Those three areas turned red on the map. “Clover will divide you into teams to rush to those objectives and hold them, and then, from those positions, you’ll fan out to sack the town once the order is given. The group attacking the docks will include Clover, and she’ll be sinking the two ships currently tied up to the docks. The group going with her will be protecting her while she works her magic.

“While our fighters attack Parai, the rest of you will wait for us here, with enough fighters left with you to protect you from harm,” he said, causing a section of the forest just to the west of Parai to light up. “When we finish sacking Parai, we’re coming right back through this meadow and continuing on to the west, but we’re going to need you at Parai to help carry away what we loot. The pack bearers and camp workers will wait for the signal to enter town, and when you get it, run in and help carry away what the attackers are pulling out of the buildings. While you do so, *be careful*,” he stressed. “We *should* have most of the humans out of town by that point, but there’s always a chance some stray human manages to stay hidden. So be alert when you come in and start picking up the supplies and carrying them back to the staging point.

“Once we have those three objectives under our control, we’ll spread out from them and start taking out any resistance, freeing the Arcans in town, and sacking it. The men of town will be sleepy and unable to see well in the darkness, and will be easy to kill. You kill anyone carrying a weapon, brothers and sisters, even if it’s a kitchen knife. We need those weapons for ourselves. You also free every Arcan you come across, if possible. If the collar allows them to move around freely, bring them with you. If the Arcan is wearing a collar that won’t let them leave the house, send out a call for Dancer. Her sole duty in this attack is to get the collars off the town’s Arcans so we can get them safely out of town.”

He gave them all a grim look. “We are not going to be gentle, brothers and sisters. Simply put, you kill anyone that you even *think* is trying to resist you or get in your way of your mission, and that includes women and children. This is a sacking, and the lives of the humans *do not matter*. Kill anyone that gets in your way. Once we have the populace running for the forest, we free every Arcan we find, take everything of value we can carry, then burn the rest so the humans can’t use it. When you loot a building, place what you took out of the building in the street for the other Arcans to collect, then set fire to the building so everyone else knows that it’s already been cleaned out. And keep your guard up while you’re looting the town, humans have a long-standing tendency to hide in their houses, and they

might attack you as you're searching their houses. The main things you're after when looting a building are weapons, food, waterskins and canteens, tents, packs, bedrolls and blankets, and any alchemical devices you find that are small and easy to carry. Remember, we have to carry everything ourselves, so only take what you think will be useful to us in the days to come. Ignore most everything else.

"We *must* be out of Parai by dawn," he stressed. "That means that at an hour before dawn, I'll be sending out the call to set fire to the town. When I give that order, everyone will stop pillaging, make sure there are no Arcans in the buildings that haven't been burned, then set fire to them. Then we form up on the north side of town and leave. Our objective is here, an abandoned plantation 26 minars west of Parai, near the coast of the Quiet Sea," he said, expanding his illusory map and showing their route. "We'll be holing up there for a couple of days to rest, recover, and reorganize, then we'll begin our march north.

"When in the city, remember these three rules," he said strongly. "One. Never go anywhere alone. Always move about in pairs at the very minimum, in groups of four when possible, because a lone Arcan is easier to kill than an Arcan in a group. Two. Never, *ever* let your guard down," he said intensely. "Attacks could come from anywhere at any time. Men might shoot at you from windows. Men might shoot at you from the rooftops. Someone might burst out of a doorway while you're busy. This is why you never go anywhere alone, friends. When you move in units, it puts more eyes out to look for danger. Three. Don't shoot *each other* out there. Make sure that you're shooting at humans, not at other Arcans.

"I know I'm more or less throwing you in a lake to sink or swim here by having you attack and destroy a town barely a day after you were freed, but we don't have time to train you in the art of soldiering. This is going to be a trial by fire for all of us, brothers and sisters," he warned. "Just trust in each other, keep alert, and remember the plan. Always, always, *always* remember your plan of action, and hold to it unless you receive orders otherwise, at least for now. When you gain more experience, you'll be able to tell when it's the best thing to do to change those plans on your own, but

you have a ways to go before you get there. As you gain experience, you'll start to learn the art of being a soldier. I guarantee that in three weeks you'll be veterans, and we will *shock* the Flaurens with how effective and efficient we are as an army," he promised. "Alright, any questions?" he called loudly.

They were all quiet, either understanding the plan or too afraid to speak up to ask a question.

"Alright then. Everyone get your gear stowed and get ready to move out, we leave in half an hour."

Exactly thirty minutes later, Kyven was loading the last of his things on Vasha's saddle, his nannies around him, and the other Shaman gathered near Sirra and Dauro. Because Vasha was so big, he couldn't ride her through the forest. The southern pines of Flaur didn't usually begin branching out until high up, allowing a man on a horse to ride among them without much trouble, but Vasha was just too tall. She had to lower her head to get it under quite a few branches, and Kyven would have to ride all but laying forward in the saddle through the trees. Behind him, the Arcans were organized into two columns, each of them carrying their gear and equipment, and most of them were very anxious. "We ready?" he asked.

"Ready, brother," Stalker replied.

"Then let's get this overwith," he said heavily, starting ahead.

The run along the trail was quiet and tense behind them as they moved in the deepening night, the Arcans moving without issue thanks to their night-sighted eyes, as Kyven relied on spirit sight to keep them on the path. Vasha had to duck her head almost constantly to get under low branches, causing the occasional rustle of wood and pine needles, along with the low voices of the Arcans behind him and the clatter and clacking of their equipment creating most of the sound. The carpet of fallen pine needles underfoot, even on the path, muted the sound of their footsteps. Kyven had no problem keeping up with the faster Arcans on foot because they weren't running, jogging along as most of the Arcans moved behind him on two legs. If they dropped to all fours to run, they would leave him behind.

But he had a plan to deal with that, one he'd be setting in motion very soon.

It took them about two hours to reach the edge of the forest, and about a hundred rods away were the houses on the edge of Parai. The town had no wall, and there were quite a few alchemical lights and lamps lighting the streets. The Parai townsfolk were nervous, Kyven suspected, because their soldiers had not come back. But this late at night, he could see that many of the townsfolk were in bed, at least where he could see.

Kyven halted Vasha behind him as the Arcans started to spread out and hunker down behind trees, staying out of sight, as they were told to do while they marched towards the town. "Brother, sister, you ready?" Kyven asked as he checked his pistols one after the other. Stalker and Dancer did the same, both of them carrying duplicated Colt pistols, and they knew how to use them.

"Ready, brother," Stalker said.

"I'm ready, brother," Dancer mirrored. "I already see six Arcans," she noted, looking around. "This may take longer than I expected. If every block is like this, there are more Arcans here than we thought."

"We'll get them all, sister," Kyven said as he turned. "Wait for me here," he told the Lupans and Vasha. He noted Dauro's look of displeasure. "No attitude, Dauro. This is a town, not a plantation or the forest. You stand out here. Stay here and protect the Arcans, they're going to need you."

Dauro blinked his faintly glowing amber eyes with annoyance, then plopped down heavily to sit. He was clearly not happy.

"I am *so* moved," he drawled, which made Vasha snort in amusement. "You three can kill any humans that try to run in this direction. That make you happy?"

Dauro gave a few wags of his tail.

“Just don’t get too messy,” he said as he turned back around, then knelt down. His brother and sisters knelt with him as he created an illusory map on the ground. “Alright, here we are,” he pointed. “Clover, here’s the armory, here’s the town hall, and here are the docks. You organize the fighters while we get in there and start doing our work. You can drop each detachment off at its assignment as you move through town.”

“A sensible plan, brother,” she nodded. “It should only take me a few moments to sink those ships.”

“Just do it fast, before the crews can react. I’ve never met a sailor that wasn’t a handful in a fight.” He slid his finger along a street. “This will probably be the messiest part of this attack, friends. This street has the most houses on it. Expect most of the resistance to come from here. Stalker, remember, this is about stealth,” he reminded his larger friend. “When you kill, do it silently. We need to have the night watch patrols dead, the alarm gongs out of action and the garrison armory locked down before the Flaurens realize we’re here.”

“I can kill as quietly as you can, brother,” he said with a slight, ominous smile. “I’ll concentrate on the patrols, you focus on the alarm gongs and armory. Save your strength for when it is truly needed.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed. “Okay, I’ll shadow walk in and seal off the armory from the inside, then take out the gongs. After that, I’ll spend the rest of the time waiting for midnight moving through the houses and taking any weapons I find, so they’re not being used against *us*. That should reduce the threat to our brave Arcans that much more.” He took in a deep breath, exhaled, then his body all but vanished as he took on his shadow form, becoming a two-dimensional hole in the darkness. Only his glowing eyes were visible, two pools of ominous green in the murky night. “Alright, here we go. Midnight exactly, Clover,” he reminded her. “That’s a little over an hour from now.”

“I’ll be there when you need me, brother.”

“Brother, sister, let’s do this,” he said. “Be careful.”

“You too, brother,” Dancer said. She and Stalker darted on silent feet towards the town, but Kyven created a circle of shadow under his feet, and with a raising hand, caused it to travel up his body and pull him into the shadow world.

The town was sleeping, but there were some that were awake, mainly those soldiers, militia men, and city leaders who fretted over the search party not returning, nor answering the talker sent with them. They were gathered in the town hall, which was Kyven’s second stop after shadow walking into the armory in the army garrison, killing the ten sleepy guards standing watch inside it, then blocking off the door from the inside, making it impossible to get into it without chopping the door down with an axe. The armory had a lot of useful weapons in it, some 50 muskets in racks on the walls with many open slots in the racks where the muskets the Arcans had already taken had come from, a case holding 50 horsemen’s pistols, and they also had some alchemical weapons. There were nine shockrods with an empty slot for a tenth, ten firetubes, ten impact rods, and ten annihilators locked in a cabinet behind a heavy bar and padlock, most likely only meant to be used in exceptional circumstances. The tenth shockrod, Kyven realized, was the one they’d taken off that officer after they ambushed them. All of those alchemical weapons would be *very* useful for his army. But Kyven wasn’t going to confuse his soldiers by giving them a weapon they’d never seen before and expect them to use it in an attack just an hour after getting it. It was safer to just let them use what they had and then give them the weapons when they had time to safely learn how they worked. He did filch all ten annihilators out of their armory, however, since they had powering crystals in them and were ready to be used.

It just went to show how dismissive the Flaurens were over the Arcans, they didn’t even take those annihilators with them when they rode out to kill the Shaman. It seemed a bit odd to him that they didn’t think to take them to use against the *Shaman*, for that matter. These southern Flauren must truly be dismissive of Shaman, because they were *Arcans*.

Actually, it wasn’t all that surprising, he realized after thinking about it a moment while he watched and listened in on the city leaders from the

shadow world. These southern Flaurens lived in complete security down here, and after so long in nice domestic bliss where nothing bad ever happened, it lulled them into a sense that nothing ever would. The Arcans didn't seem dangerous to them because there were *just slaves*. They probably feared the Shaman, but not as much as others who may have had to deal with them, since nothing bad ever happened in Parai. But now something bad *had* happened, and listening in on the men of the city council, he realized that these men had no idea how to handle it. They were lost, because the one man in Parai that *did* have the training to manage it was the Flauren army officer in command of the garrison, and he was on leave to visit family in Orlann. He'd left his lieutenant in command, and the lieutenant had been leading the expedition to kill the Shaman and deal with the runaway Arcans from King's Garden. These men didn't know what to do about a situation where things were *not* just fine in Parai, where something serious had happened which they had never expected, and they had no one to turn to for help. They argued among themselves about the best course of action, some stubbornly refused to admit nothing was wrong while others wanted to bang the alarm gongs and turn out the entire town's men to form a militia to find the missing war party.

They didn't argue much longer. Those annihilators came in handy... disintegrating the collected town leaders and militiamen in town hall as they argued about what to do. And since he used them in the same manner he had against the Councillars when he attacked Loremaster headquarters, setting an activated annihilator under the table around which they'd gathered while remaining in the shadow world, those men never knew what hit them. Annihilators made no sound until they went off, and that sound wasn't all that loud, just a dull *fwumph* of activation. The heated voices in the room were cut off instantaneously by that dull *fwumph* and a shimmer of grayish light, and then there was nothing but the chiming and clinking of the non-organic gear those men were carrying falling to the floor and a thick pall of dust hanging in the air. The annihilator had killed them all, as well as disintegrating the wooden table around which they stood

The rest of the hour passed quickly for him. After completely removing the alarm gongs by pulling them through the shadow world and tossing them a few minars offshore, tossing them into the Angry Sea, he moved through the shadow world from house to house. A nearly permanent shadowy gateway near Clover rained almost constant muskets, pistols, old cavalry sabers hanging on walls, even large knives taken from kitchens as Kyven moved as quickly as he could to take the personal weapons of the townsfolk so they couldn't be used against the Arcans. A surprising number of them had hunting muskets, which were built differently than military muskets. He captured a large number of muskets and pistols from the lone weapons shop in town which sold the items to the townspeople.

By the end of the hour, Kyven had removed the weapons from nearly half of the houses in town and had blocked off the armory. Kyven looked through town from the shadow world and saw that his brother and sister had moved with the same swift skill. Stalker had eliminated every patrol of the night watch with quiet, lethal skill, tracking them down and freezing them in place with his magic, then dragging the frozen corpses into alleys to hide them. He also killed every towns person out and about he encountered, and he wasn't discriminatory. He killed men traveling home after a late night in the town's three pubs, quite a few women seeking to sell a good time to those revelers, and even a few older children slinking about in the night, effectively clearing the streets.

As he cleared the streets, Dancer hurried from house to house, using spirit sight to look through the walls to see if there were Arcans within, and if there were, breaking in and removing them. She mostly had an easy time of it, bringing the Arcans out with her—they'd heard the rumors and knew that the Arcans on the king's plantation had all been freed by a Shaman—but she did run into a few problems, mainly with Arcans who had no intention of leaving their house or their masters. Those, Dancer dealt with with her magic, putting them to sleep and laying them on the deserted streets for the invading Arcans to pick up and carry to safety.

At exactly midnight, Clover initiated the attack. With surprising speed and stealth, the Arcans rushed into Parai, being as quiet as possible, rushing

down the wide cobblestone streets. A large group stopped at the armory, going inside it to find all the men dead, holding fast at that position. The rest of them continued towards town hall, and they got all the way to it before a human woman screamed from an upstairs window, screaming hysterically that Arcans were running in the streets. Alchemical lights and lanterns started winking on in almost every upstairs window along the street facing town hall, but Clover didn't react to the shouting woman. She waved her Arcans on, and when they reached town hall, half of the remaining group entered it to get out of sight until the order to attack was issued. More and more lights came on in bedrooms as she led the last group of Arcans the short distance between town hall and the docks. Clover ran right to the very end of the quay to which the two ships in port were tied, and she moved with efficiency. Arcans kicked off the gangplanks and attacked the hawsers with axes, chopping the mooring lines, then Arcans used gaffing hooks picked up at the foot of the dock at Clover's direction to push the ships away from the quays, which would make it extremely hard for the sailors aboard them to get onto the dock. Clover attacked the first boat with her magic, her eyes glowing brightly as she made a gesture, raising her hand up and back as if to throw something. A long line of pure magical energy extended from her hand, growing, growing, growing, floating over and behind her, then she whipped her hand over her head and down all the way to the wood of the quay, which caused that magical line of energy to snap straight and streak around in an arc so quickly that it almost looked like a solid bar of light.

A mana whip! Clover had reproduced the effect of a mana whip with her magic!

Whatever that line of magical energy struck, it sheared apart as if that line of magic was the sharpest sword ever honed by man, Arcan, or god. The whip was long enough to go all way across the deck of the ship, but it first sheared through the rigging between the two masts, cutting ropes. When it hit the railing and the deck, it went right through it like they weren't even there. The magical tendril sheared all the way down through the ship, from the deck all the way to the keel, going all the way down into

the water. And the instant the whip cut the keel, the two halves of the ship gave a loud wooden groan and leaned away from each other as the movement of the water pulled the two halves apart. Startled shouts and curses came from the ship, but Clover was already turning around to face the other ship, her mana whip in the water like a fishing line, then she brought it up and over her head with careful aim. The glowing line streaked over the dock and then slammed into the other ship, a galleon, and it fared no better than the smaller caravel. The ship was sliced in half in a heartbeat, the two pieces yawing away from each other as men appeared on deck, looking around wildly and screaming.

Clover put a finger to her muzzle, then a shrill whistle reverberated across the entire town, it was so loud. And at the sound of that whistle, the Arcans in their three positions attacked.

Kyven returned to the real world and decided he could best help by assisting Dancer in freeing Arcans, allowing the Arcans to do what they were told to do, to gain confidence in themselves without Kyven holding their hands. They knew what to do, and as Kyven entered the nearest house holding two Arcans, they started. Sporadic gunfire followed up the whistle, then it became more constant as the musket-wielding Arcans opened fire on men coming out of their houses.

By the time Kyven had killed the lone man living in the small apartment over the shop and freed the two Arcans, a mated pair of ferrets, it was complete chaos on the streets. Men and women ran screaming in their nightclothes as Arcans swarmed all over, stopping to fire their muskets, creating flashes of bright light on the shadowy street. Kyven stepped over the body of a woman in her nightgown, shot through the chest and her eyes glazed in death, herding the two frightened ferrets towards a throng of Arcans at an intersection. He saw Arcans storming into houses up and down the street, saw flashes of musket fire within the houses, and with his spirit sight, he saw that the Arcans were doing what they were told, killing the men in the house and allowing the women and children to run, but they were killing the women and children if they tried to fight back. Kyven pulled his pistol and shot a man running down the street with a musket, who

wasn't trying to use it, just carrying it, rushing over to him with the two ferrets following. "Take this," he said, pushing the musket into the hands of the male. "Carry it with you back to the others. Just don't try to use it, it's not loaded," he added after checking the breech.

"Are you a pirate?" the female asked fearfully.

Kyven laughed. "I'm a Shaman, little one," he said with a smile as they stood back up. "And we're here to free you."

Kyven took the two ferrets to the group of five Arcans in the intersection. Two were reloading their muskets rather clumsily as the other three were on the lookout for anyone to shoot. "One of you take these two to the staging area," Kyven ordered. "Do *not* come back by yourself, wait for another Arcan to need to come back before you return."

"I'll go," one of the standing canine Arcans said, turning towards them. "Come with me, I'll get you out of here."

"Thank you, Shaman!" the male ferret said, then the two ran towards the western edge of town with the larger canine.

"Clover told you to hold this intersection?" Kyven asked the four remaining.

"Yes, Shaman, she has groups at every major intersection in town," a fairly large female canine with the tip of her right ear notched replied. "She said with us here, it prevents the humans from forming large groups to challenge us."

"Those are good orders," Kyven agreed. "But you don't want to stand out in the open like this. Drag tables and other big things out of the houses around you and build a blind so humans with guns can't see you. If they can't see you, they can't take easy aim at you."

"Yes, Shaman," she said. "Two of us stay here, two of us go," she said, taking charge and pointing. "Longclaw, Halftail, go bring back things. We'll hold the intersection."

“Yes, Honey,” one of them said, and the two of them went into the open doorway of the nearest house.

“Congratulations, Honey, you’re now a sergeant,” Kyven told her easily.

“A what?”

“Something we’ll explain later. Basically it means you can tell others what to do.”

“I do that anyway, I was the leader of my shanty town,” she replied easily. “These are Arcans from my shanty town. They’d *better* obey me.”

“Keep them in line, Honey,” he chuckled, then he got back to work.

After an hour, all real resistance in Parai to the Arcan attack had been eradicated. Between Kyven stealing many of their weapons to them being confused, blinded by the darkness, and scattered around town in their homes, they were easy prey for Arcans who had a plan and who had attacked by surprise. Men who tried to fight back found they were alone or with only maybe their next door neighbors against dozens of dozens of armed Arcans running the streets. They found Arcans holding the major intersections, shooting at anyone that approached them, forcing the screaming, fleeing people down dark, narrow alleys, which further added to the confusion. When the fires started to break out, it created near panic in those who were still running in the streets. Those who tried to barricade themselves in their houses were dealt with by having their houses set on fire with them in it, as the Arcans were told to deal with them. Any house whose door could not be forced open was set on fire. Some of those who barricaded themselves inside managed to get out before being burned to death, but some died in their houses, killed by the smoke before the fire reached them. Climbing Arcans got up onto the roofs to get a good commanding view of the streets, shooting at men who were trying to shoot at the Arcans on the streets from the windows of their homes. The Arcans used up most of the powder and shot taken from the soldiers, falling back on their natural weaponry and the hand weapons they’d carried with them,

turning the streets into a bloodbath of hacked and beaten bodies, and blood running in rivulets between the cobblestones from the dead. Bodies littered the streets, mostly human but also with Arcans among them, illuminated by the fires from the houses. Humans trying to drag their collared Arcans with them were killed and the Arcans freed, Arcans were being pulled from houses all over town whose collars wouldn't let them leave and who were abandoned by their owners, all of them being hurried to the safety of the staging area by escorting fighting Arcans. Some of the Arcans were spirited out of town by their owners, but the vast majority of them were captured by Kyven's army.

And among them, found by Kyven himself in the kennel, was the very rabbit that had fled the plantation to warn her masters of Kyven's plans. She had clearly been beaten, badly beaten, laying on the floor of a cage curled in a fetal ball. Kyven himself had been the one to free her from her cage and take her to the staging area, and she looked nearly broken. She had been a good girl and told her masters about Kyven, and they had beaten her and thrown her in a kennel for her loyalty.

Once the last few holdouts were killed, with most of the townsfolk having fled, the looting began. Arcans broke down doors and sacked the houses, stacking food and useful equipment out in the street, and the noncombatant Arcans started to appear, running in, grabbing what was set out for them, then running back to the staging area with the booty.

Kyven took stock of things two hours before dawn. They were looting more than they could possibly carry, he realized, which would require them to prioritize when they packed to move. Nearly a quarter of the city was already on fire, and the surviving townsfolk were fleeing along the north road, heading for the fishing village of Canverra, which was about ten minars up the coast. They'd freed all the Arcans in town that they could find, collars littering the streets along with the dead, the armory had been plundered, town hall was already a conflagration lighting up most of the southern side of town. Dancer stopped beside him as he studied an illusory map he'd put on the ground at his feet, kneeling down with him. "How goes it, brother?" she asked.

“We’re almost done,” he replied. “I’ll be calling for the town to be burned earlier than planned, we already have more than we can carry sitting on the streets waiting to be picked up. Did you heal the rabbit?”

She nodded. “She’ll be alright. She’s very distraught at the moment.”

“Not a shock,” he grunted, studying the map. “How many Arcans did we free?”

“Nearly two hundred,” she answered. “The majority of them are house Arcans. The small breeds,” she told him.

“I noticed,” he nodded. He glanced to the side when he felt a disturbance in the shadows, and Toby stepped into the real world, the shadow bleeding out of his fur. He knelt down beside Kyven.

“Ayah, Ah shoulda figured you’d be up tah fightin’,” he said. “How goes it?”

“The fighting was over a long time ago, right now we’re in the loot and pillage phase,” he replied dryly, which made Toby chuckle. “What brings you by?”

“Nothin’ much. Just wanted tah tell ya that yo’ spirit said she come up with a way tah fix yo’ amulet,” he said. “It gonna make me have tah go back to bein’ human. Ah’m almost gonna miss this,” he said, running his hand up his furred arm. “But she said Ah get tah keep mah shadow powers when Ah turn back, just like you did. She said they’s part o’ me now, and can’t nevah be taken away. She said Danna will keep them too, once she has her babies an’ can change back.”

“She hasn’t told me about it yet. But then again, she never really tells me anything,” he grunted. “But that’s good to know. When is she changing you back?”

“Tonight,” he replied. “She done warned me that it won’t be pleasant.”

“How goes Atan?”

“Waitin’,” he replied. “The Flaurens, they still be cloggin’ up the whole thing. Nobody can get past ‘em, but they ain’t movin’ from they spot. Them Flaurens, they be waitin’ fo’ somethin’, but we ain’t sure what it is. Danna sent me an’ Nightfall in there tah try to find out what, but we ain’t found nothing yet. Until they break the stalemate, all we can do is keep getting’ ready fo’ ‘em.” He chuckled. “The scoutin’ army DeVaur sent, they took one look at what we built and done turned tail an’ ran back fo’ Chardon. But the Georvans, *they* done tried somethin’.”

“The mountaineers?”

He nodded with a fanged grin. “They sent a group o’ mountaineers in, tried tah come in from the north tah scout our forces. Danna wiped them out.”

Kyven looked up when he heard a musket shot that was very close by, then saw with his spirit sight two Arcans running into an alley, pointing their muskets at something on the ground he couldn’t see...a human they’d just killed, probably someone hiding in a basement somewhere who had made a run for it.

“What was that?”

“Someone shot someone hiding out,” he replied dismissively. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Yo’ Arcans, they doin’ okay?”

“From a military standpoint? Much better than I expected,” he replied. “But we didn’t give them very complicated instructions, either, they’re new to this. But they did what we told them to do very well,” he said with a complementing nod. “Once they get some experience, they’re going to be a *damn* good army.”

“Ah’m not surprised,” Toby nodded. “They Arcans up in our army, they way better at being soldiers than Ah ever thought they’d be.”

“Shaman!” a young cat called, running up to them. “Shaman, there are men on horses riding towards us from the north road!”

“How many?” he asked, dismissing the illusion of his map and standing up.

“About fifty,” the young female replied, probably one of Fastpaw’s scouts.

Kyven swore. “Canverra men,” he said. “They must have seen the fires and are riding down here to help. Go to the staging area, little one, and get ready to scout the path we took to get here, that’s the way we’re going back.” She nodded once and dropped to all fours, racing away. He built an idea in his mind for an illusion and beseeched his spirit, who responded and granted him the energy to cast the spell. It was an illusion of sound only, creating a booming voice that reached all the way across town, but a voice that only Arcans could hear. “We’re done!” Kyven called to them. “Collect up what’s been put on the streets and set fire to the town! Burn every building and pull back to the staging area! Brother, sisters, go through the plunder and prioritize what we take, destroy what we can’t take, then get our army on the move for our next stopping point! Fastpaw, deploy your scouts onto the western trail to scout ahead of us, I’ll deal with the men coming from Canverra! Move, people, move, move, move!” he ordered. Almost immediately, every Arcan around them burst into a run, scrambling to obey his orders. “Feel like some exercise, Toby?” he asked as he stood up.”

“Ayah, always,” he grinned. “What we gonna do?”

“Oh, go scare the piss out of about fifty Flauren villagers riding down here from Canverra and make them run like hell,” he replied smoothly. “If I do it right, we’ll get some of their horses. That’s why I need you, you can help me gather them up.”

“Yo’ usin’ horses?” he asked in surprise.

“We’ll need them to pull the alchemical siege weapons I’m sure we’ll capture in the larger cities, so may as well start collecting them now,” he replied. “As long as they’re not weighed down, they can keep up with the Arcans on the move. Those that don’t, we’ll just leave behind. And if we start running short on pillaged or foraged food, the Arcans can always eat the extras,” he shrugged.

Toby chuckled. “Ah’d never eat no horse, but Ah hear the Cajar think horsemeat’s some kind o’ delicacy. But them Cajar, they eat *anythin’*.”

Kyven replaced the clip in one of his pistols with a fresh one to make sure it was fully loaded, then he took on his shadow form. Toby did so as well, and Kyven pulled both of them into the shadow world. Toby followed him as he took a single step, then after casting about a bit, he found the column of Canverra militiamen, riding to the south as fast as they could safely move in the night. Alchemical lamps lit the road for them, which still had a few straggling Parai townsfolk stumbling along to the north, heading for Canverra. Kyven moved them to a point about half a minar south of them, enough time for them to prepare for their arrival, and Kyven took Toby’s wrist so they’d both exit the shadow world using the single gateway Kyven created underneath him. Had he not done that, Toby would have remained in the shadow world while Kyven left it. “Alright, we have about ten minutes before they get here,” Kyven said. “I’m gonna do what I did at Durm, Toby.”

Toby barked out a laugh. “Do one o’ those big scary illusions?”

Kyven nodded. “This one’s going to be much different, though, and it’s going to be much more dangerous,” he warned. “I’ll terrify the men and panic the horses. I’m positive they’ll buck a few riders off when they bolt. You kill anyone that falls off his horse while I make sure they don’t come back this way for the rest of their natural lives. Just do me a favor.”

“What?”

“*Believe* in what you see,” Kyven told him, looking him in the eyes. “Your doubt in my illusion might allow the Flaurens to see through it.”

“Ah know what you mean, Kyv, Ah’ve heard you explain it tah Danna,” he said with a nod. “Ah can do it, Ah’ve seen you do illusions that Ah couldn’t believe *weren’t* real.”

“Works for me. Okay, friend, go find a nice shadow to meld into. I’m sure you’ll know exactly when to get involved.”

“Ayah,” he called with a grin, then he loped off the road and slid to a stop by the closest tree. Immediately, his body dissolved into nothingness as he enacted the most basic of his shadow fox powers, the ability to meld into a shadow and disappear completely from view.

Kyven himself moved off the road so there wasn’t a direct line between him, his intended illusion, and the Flaurens, and waited. About five minutes later, the first of the men and his horse appeared out of the background radiance caused by all the life around him, coming into view of his spirit sight, and seeing that man was his signal to begin. He took in a deep breath and closed his eyes, building an image in his mind with incredible, exquisite detail, even adding texture and substance to the parts of the illusion that nobody could even *see*. When he had his image firmly in his mind, he beseeched his spirit for the energy to cast his spell. Her reaction was quite prideful when she saw what was in his mind, responding with the energy he requested, and it flowed through him as what he had built in his mind was taken from his imagination and brought into the real world.

The illusion was large, complex, and detailed. It began with a shaking of the ground that caused the men he could see to saw on their reins, the illusion so detailed and having so much substance instilled into it by Kyven’s utter belief in his reality that it even affected the horses. Smoke issued from the road in front of the men, a vile smoke smelling of sulphur and brimstone, and the shaking of the ground increased. Just as one of the men pointed, the full extent of the illusion was unleashed upon them, as a fiery, ghastly, unspeakable *thing* burst from the ground in a geyser of dirt, smoke, and flame, one of the demonic entities mentioned in the Book of the Trinity, and something out of most Noraavi’s nightmares. Men screamed in

terror as the titanic behemoth, sheathed in an aura of fiery immolation, pulled its legs out of the ground, the foot striking the road shaking the earth to the point where the limbs of the pine trees to the west shuddered and swayed. The heat of the *thing* hit the men, tightened their faces as a flame-shrouded skull glared down at them with a baleful stare. Kyven broke into an immediate sweat and gritted his teeth as he poured more and more energy into his creation, bringing his illusion into the reality of the men who were staring at it. Even as it was, it was enough to make ten of the men turn their horses and run away, spurring their horses in a frenzy to get as far away from the illusion as possible.

“FROM THE FIRES OF HELL, I AM RELEASED!” the illusion boomed in a voice that shivered the waves of the sea half a minar to the east. ***“GAZE UPON AZGRANTHISTES, DEVOURER OF SOULS, MORTAL INSECTS. I HUNGER!”***

And that was all it took. The men started screaming in panic when the giant illusion took a single step forward and reached out with an arm so long that its fingertips nearly touched the ground when it was standing upright, reaching for the closest of the men. The horses were also utterly panicked, several of them rearing and bucking, and they needed no guidance to flee from Kyven’s illusion. Seven or eight men were knocked off their horses as the Canverra men turned around and followed the ten who had already fled back towards their village, all of them screaming and howling in abject terror, and that was when Toby burst into action. He rushed forward and killed the first man he reached with his claws, tore his pistol out of his stiffening hands, then shot the next closest dead in the face as he tried to recover from being bucked off his mount. The other men barely took notice of it, for their fear-crazed eyes were locked on the illusion that Kyven was maintaining. They didn’t notice that the fires sheathing the legs of the titanic behemoth didn’t set fire to the fur of the black-furred Arcan at its feet, because all they could see was that flame-shrouded hand reaching for them, reaching for their *souls*.

Toby moved swiftly, taking advantage of their terror. He yanked a horseman’s saber from the man he’d shot and used it to kill the other men,

who were either paralyzed with terror or were running for their very *souls* and were not in any way paying attention to anything but running as fast as they possibly could. But they were nowhere near as fast as Toby, who chased the men down and dispatched them with his new weapon with almost ridiculous ease.

When the last man fell to the ground and the mounted men were far out of sight, Kyven gave an explosive release of breath from his position and canceled the illusion. The hellish titan shimmered and then vanished without a sound, and Kyven wilted to one knee as the effort caught up with him. But the illusion had not left the real world without leaving its mark. There were blackened pits in the road where it stood, the dirt compacted by the illusion's phantom weight and seared and burned by its fire, and several licks of flame flickered in the grass to each side of the road, combusted by the heat and fire emanating from his illusion.

"Ayah, Kyv, that was somethin!" Toby laughed as he dropped the saber on the ground on his way back.

"Wait, don't throw that away," Kyven panted. "Let's collect up their weapons and try to chase down their horses."

"Ah'll do it, you rest a spell," Toby told him. "Y'all look tired."

"That's not easy," he said, blowing out his breath and getting back on his feet. "But I'm okay. There's too much to do for me to sit on my butt."

They never did find the horses, so they shadow walked two armloads of weapons back to the staging area, the unshrouded weapons attracting the attention of the *things*, who started drifting in their direction. Clover and Dancer were organizing things at the staging area while Arcans stuffed foodstocks and goods into pilfered packs, bags, and sacks, and everyone was loading themselves down with equipment. Sirra and Dauro bounded up to him, greeting him happily, and Vasha trotted up behind them. "Hey guys," he said, touching each of them. "Any trouble?"

Sirra's tongue lolled out of her mouth.

“You two are so mean,” he chuckled wearily, patting her on the head. “How goes things, sister?”

“We’re almost ready to move,” Clover replied as she pointed two Arcans towards the west. “We’re going to have to leave much of this behind, brother. It’s just too much.”

“I know,” he replied. “We scared off the men that were coming this way, so we should have no trouble.”

Toby laughed. “Ayah, did Kyv ever scare the everlovin’ piss outta ‘em!” he said, laughing again. “Ah ain’t never seen nothin’ that impressive befo’, and Ah’ve seen a ton of Kyv’s illusions!”

“I think we heard it all the way over here,” Stalker said with a dark smile. “Some kind of roar, then something about insects and being hungry.”

Toby laughed harder and nodded. “That was it,” he declared. “Y’all shoulda seen it! It was *amazin’!*”

Dancer almost unconsciously put her hand on the medallion around her neck, carved from the stone that he’d caused to pass right through her hand in a demonstration of the hidden power of illusion.

“Our brother’s talent in illusion awes many of us, Toby,” Clover chuckled. “Now, if you’re staying here, make yourself useful and put on a pack. We need all the strong backs we can find.”

Toby laughed. “Ayah, Ah guess Ah can at least hang around til y’all get where yo’ goin’. But Ah gotta be back in Atan soon. Danna might think Ah abandoned her,” he chuckled.

“Stay as long as you can, Toby. You will be a definite help,” Clover told him.

By dawn, Parai was a raging inferno, and the Arcans that had destroyed it were deep in the pine forest west of the destroyed town and well on their way to their next destination, an abandoned plantation in a remote unpopulated stretch of Flaur where their neophyte army could better

organize itself in a relatively safe area. It was there that the foundations of the army would be laid, where Arcans that had proved themselves in the two battles would be made sergeants in the army, where their new soldiers would receive additional instruction in how to use their new weapons, and where the army's structure would be defined for their new soldiers. The Shaman would teach the Arcans the basics of *soldiering*, which was about much more than fighting.

As dawn painted the pine trees in growing light, Kyven sighed wearily and adjusted the heavy pack on his back. He too was carrying his share of the supplies, as Vasha glared unholy death at him from behind for all the weight she was carrying on her back. Even Sirra and Dauro were carrying supplies in makeshift packs tied to their backs. He was desperately tired and in need of both rest and raw meat, but he couldn't rest until they marched the 26 minars to the abandoned plantation. The entire plantation had been burned as a safety measure after the Touch spread through the Arcans working it, killing most of them, all the human overseers, and the plantation owner and his family, and it had caused the Flaurens living anywhere near it to move away for fear of the dreaded illness lingering and infecting them as well. The plantation's ghastly past would serve them well, for it was a place no Flauren would dare go. It would provide protection for them as they took time they didn't really have to instruct their new army in the basics of *being* an army.

They had begun in King's Garden, but the Arcan army that would sweep across Flaur and leave it nothing but a smoking ruin would be born in the abandoned and reportedly haunted former plantation whose name was so taboo that had been stricken from Flauren records. It was simply known as *that place*, and *that place* would justify all the fears the Flaurens held of it.

It had once harbored the Touch that had wiped out the plantation's inhabitants and nearly unleashed a virulent plague that could have wiped out most of the Flaurens in the southern peninsula. Now it would harbor the army that would sweep out from its borders worse than any plague, destroying everything in its path as it marched across the peninsula in its

mission to devastate human civilization and shatter the very basics of working society across all of Noraam.

Kyven hated it. He hated it with every fiber of his being, what he had done and what he knew he had to do. The blood was now on his hands. He had killed women, killed children, and ordered the slaughter of many more. The defiant mother and the young boy who decried her murder, who was then killed himself, would forever be seared into Kyven's memory as the first of the innocents he gunned down with brutal disregard, the first of many atrocities that would cause mankind to brand him as the most evil man to have ever walked the face of the earth. But it had to be done, and a Shaman did not shy away from an unpleasant task.

It had to be done, no matter how much he desperately wished that it was not so.

It had to be done, despite knowing that he was damning his friends and the Arcans around him to his own fate.

It had to be done.

Chapter 3

Kyven had decided to name her Sunny.

She was a complete pariah in the army, despite Kyven's warning to them to *not* do that to her. She was the rabbit that had run to warn the humans of Kyven's intent, and now...she was his.

She represented the ultimate in the slave mentality that some Arcans spent their entire lives in Haven trying to conquer. Kyven was the only human around, so she had almost unconsciously gravitated towards him, seeking to serve a new master. She was weirdly cute, as many Arcans were to humans, with dark gray fur with a white belly, but she had a very striking feature, a patch of brown fur over her left eye that extended up into her grayish hair. One of her ears had been damaged in her youth and before Dancer had healed her, it wouldn't stand up straight, causing her right ear to bend about halfway up while the left could stand upright, and like most rabbits, she could lay her ears down as well. But Dancer had healed that, had healed many scars and poorly healed injuries and wounds that had plagued the young female rabbit and made every day a constant battle against nagging, chronic pain as she worked the fields.

But she worked. She worked hard, she worked well, to please her masters, and to avoid their wrath should she fail to be a good little girl.

She was a tortured soul, Kyven could sense. She had been beaten, and beaten, and beaten, until she became the suppliant, meek, obedient little slave the humans expected her to be. She had been born on King's Garden and had been subjected to that horrid abuse almost since the day she could walk, and it had left scars that went far beyond the ones Dancer healed on her body. The collar wasn't good enough for the overseers of King's Garden. They beat and tortured their Arcans for pleasure, for sport, and as a motivational tool to make sure they didn't slack off while working the

fields. She was a haunting example of the sheer cruelty of the people Kyven was here to destroy, and in some ways, seeing Sunny steeled Kyven for what he knew he had to do in the near future.

Sunny was terrified of him, but she could not stay away from him, even more terrified of not being told what to do. The life of a battered slave was all she knew, all she had ever had, and the mystery of the unknown was even more terrifying than the horror that was her daily life. In a twisted way, she was dependent on what she *knew*, even if that life was one of constant abuse and fear. She sought him out because he represented the only life she had ever known, and no matter how much of a hell that life was, it was *her* life. He was a human, he was a *master*, and she lived to serve her masters. She would be a good little girl.

Over the two days they'd been holed up in their hidden training ground, she had gone from lurking near him to taking care of his gear, more or less just moving herself into his camp so she could be his slave, be his good little girl. Kyven was going to foist her on Clover to let his gentle friend do what she could to deprogram her, but Clover told him that *he* was best suited for that, because the first step for Sunny to break her conditioning was to see Kyven as something different than a *master*. That was something she couldn't do if she didn't stay near him so she could observe him. So, Kyven had told Ebony to let her more or less ingratiate herself into Kyven's personal camp. Ebony and the boys saw how wretched she was and immediately pitied her, to the point where they looked at her as their poor lost little sister in desperate need of their love and protection. Even Sirra and Dauro seemed to like her, though she was afraid of both the Lupans and of Vasha.

She was where she always was since moving herself into his camp, just sitting on her legs near a small firepit, waiting patiently to be given a task to do when she'd done all her other chores. She wouldn't do *anything* without Kyven's permission, not even relieve herself. She wore her same field worker's clothes, which was a pair of tattered canvas breeches with no shirt, the pants the only protection she had against the tough, wiry cotton plants that her shanty had tended in the fields. Kyven did have to look down at her

fluffy little tail as he approached his camp, which was considered the center of the army, *his* army. He was the general of this army, and so the army had set its camp with him at its center. Sunny bowed her head meekly when he stepped around her and dropped down by his fire, blowing out his breath and leaning back on his hands. He was a little tired after a long day of training the fighting Arcans with their muskets, overseeing the drills as they practiced how to load, fire, and reload them, as well as learning basic formations that they might have to use if they got caught out in the open during the day. And they learned *fast*, he'd noticed. In just two days, the average Arcan fighter could reload his musket in just under a minute, which was not bad, not bad at all. They still floundered a bit when it came to doing the precision drills, learning how to move in coordinated groups, and they weren't very good shots with their muskets, but they had all learned how to reload them to the point where they knew exactly what to do. They didn't do it very fast, but they knew how to do it.

Kyven had seen Danvers teach those skills to *his* army, so Kyven was teaching those same skills to his own army.

They were also adapting quickly to the *lifestyle* of the soldier. Arcans were literally created to be soldiers, and that basic lifestyle was programmed into them. Living in groups with little privacy. Obedience to their commanding officer. Acting as a group for the benefit of the group, over the benefit of the individual. Depending on one another. Those were things that soldiers had to learn, but they were basic nature to an Arcan, and that made them pre-disposed to be good soldiers. The camp they'd set up had a military feel to it, for the Arcans had set up their camps and bedrolls in neat, orderly groups around communal firepits. They'd dug out latrine trenches well away from the living area, and the food managers had quickly organized and were now managing the food they'd raided, in addition to extra food that the hunters and foragers were bringing back from the surrounding wilderness. Most Arcans had learned basic skills in foraging just from the slave lifestyle, learning what plants were edible when hunger drove them to seek out extra rations. There wasn't a field Arcan alive that had worked a field longer than a year that hadn't eaten weeds, bugs, and

pests like mice and moles to supplement the slop they were fed by their owners.

Things were going fairly well. After speaking with many Arcans in the army, he had promoted enough of them to sergeants and corporals to create a command structure. The Arcans that had demonstrated leadership skills in the destruction of Parai had become the squad leaders, with the Shaman and his nannies serving as the officers. They had been organized into companies, platoons, and squads, the same structure Danvers had applied, and his leaders had been issued the alchemical weapons they'd captured as additional armament, since their survival was important in a battle. His sergeants and corporals would had all the shockrods, firetubes, and impact rods they had, but only the Shaman and the nannies were carrying the annihilators...those were a bit too dangerous for anyone but those well educated in their use.

“Long day, Shaman?” Ebony asked.

“They all are anymore,” he replied, flopping down onto his back and putting his hands over his face. “And it’ll be a long night, too.”

“Are you going out *again*?” Ebony asked dangerously.

“I sorta have to tonight, Ebony. Today’s the day I deliver Andra’s letters to her parents and bring their letters back to her. I made them a promise, part of the deal I made to get Andra over here. A bargain is a bargain, and a Shaman does *not* renege on his bargains.”

“You are going to get sick if you don’t get some sleep, Shaman!” Ebony protested. “How much sleep did you get last night?”

“Maybe an hour.”

“And the night before?”

“I had too much to do to sleep then,” he said defensively. “I have to go out and plan out our routes, and that includes me keeping an eye on the Flauren defenses. The king’s moving a lot faster than I expected. He already

has a pretty large detachment on its way down here from Orlann. I guess us sacking Parai got back to him very quickly, and it incited more of a response than I anticipated,” he grunted.

“You have to get some sleep tonight, Shaman. It won’t take all *that* long to deliver those letters.”

“I have something much better on my mind than sleep, but it does involve a bed,” he said with a grin up at his wolf companion. He didn’t miss Sunny’s slight shudder at his innuendo. The overseers had abused her sexually as well as physically. “I convinced Danna to come down here late this afternoon, when she has some spare time and can get away with it,” he told Ebony eagerly. “She’s going to look over our army, but I’m sure as the spirits not letting her get out of here without getting mused.”

“I’m sure she won’t mind being mused,” Ebony said lightly, which made Kyven laugh.

“She never does,” he told her playfully. “She’s bringing us a command tent so we can put our maps out without them getting wet, and extra critical supplies I asked for. Mainly some extra alchemical tools and two healing bells, so Dancer won’t all but kill herself trying to heal the wounded. I want everyone in the army to have an alchemical firestarter at the very least, you never know when you’re going to need a fire. She’s bringing some, and a few other things we can use.”

She gave him a look. “When will that alchemist finish what you’re having him build?”

“Hopefully very soon,” he replied, looking up at her. “Virren has to finish it before they withdraw from Atan, so he doesn’t have much longer.”

Sunny shivered with fear but did not move when Sirra and Dauro stalked over to him, passing by her the pester Kyven. They’d been out hunting, and the Lupans being Lupans, they’d brought back several deer and four wild boar. He laughed when both of them licked him on the face with their skillet-sized tongues, and Sirra laid down beside him as Dauro

turned and sat down, letting him scrub his fingers through the wiry yet also strangely soft fur on his lower back, by the base of his tail. Sirra jealously pawed at his leg to make him pay attention to her, and he put a hand over her neck, yanking her head against him almost roughly, making her yelp a tiny bit in surprise. She settled her large head in his lap and let him pet her.

“Sunny,” he called. She looked at him fearfully, almost afraid to make eye contact. “Come here.”

She got up and sidled over, clearly afraid of the two Lupans, her ears dropping down against her dark gray hair. “Sit,” he ordered, patting the ground just beside him. She did so warily, hesitantly, looking at him with fearful amber eyes. “Put your hand here,” he ordered, patting Sirra on top of her head. “It’s okay. She won’t hurt you.”

She was clearly afraid, but she was more afraid of what might happen if she didn’t obey. She reached out and tentatively put her hand on Sirra’s head, not petting, just resting it there. Sirra raised her head, which made Sunny flinch. She trembled as Sirra leaned over Kyven’s lap and snuffled at her bare chest, then she gasped and recoiled when Sirra rasped her tongue halfway up Sunny’s chest and face. She went very still when Kyven grabbed her by the wrist, and he put her trembling hand on the top of Sirra’s head once again. “See? She’s not going to bite you. She might try to lick you, but she’s not going to bite you,” he said softly, reassuringly. “Go ahead, pet her,” he urged. Sunny did so, very tentatively, clearly only doing it because she was told to do it. Kyven watched her awkwardly pet Sirra’s fur between her ears for a moment, then leaned over and scrubbed his hand up and down Dauro’s back, which made his Lupan friend kick his leg reflexively. “Now, which one is the one you’re petting?”

“S-Sirra,” she replied in a fearful voice.

“That’s right. And this is Dauro,” he added, patting the larger male on the back. A shadow fell over him, and they both looked up to see a slightly indignant Vasha looming over them, her head over theirs. Kyven laughed and reached up as Vasha lowered her head. “And this is Vasha, who’s just as

jealous as a little filly,” he said teasingly, patting her on her lower jaw. “I thought I told you to keep the horses in their corral area,” he told her with slight sternness in his voice.

She looked utterly unrepentant, dipping her head down and batting him on the side of his black-haired head with her lips and nose.

“If I lose a horse, I’ll tell the Lupans not to hunt you any more boars,” he warned. Vasha had developed quite the taste for wild boar since they moved south, down into the boar’s range. Kyven hissed when Vasha clamped her teeth in his hair and pulled, which made Ebony laugh. “Not the hair!” Kyven barked, reaching up and grabbing her by the side of her jaw. She let go and gave a little snuffling snort of amusement, and he irritably smacked her on the nose. “Bad Equar,” he accused, but she was just as unrepentant as before. Sunny gave a squeal of fear when Vasha lifted a foreleg up over Kyven’s head, then smacked him onto his back with the backside of her hoof and ankle and put her hoof on his chest and upper belly. She didn’t press down—she could have instantly killed him if she had—she just pinned him to the ground, looking around her leg at him with a cool, challenging look. Kyven laughed and slapped lightly at her hoof and foot. “You’re scaring Sunny, stop,” he told her. Vasha did as he asked, and he sat back up and put a hand on Sunny’s bare shoulder. She shivered a bit, keeping her eyes down. “It’s alright, Vasha’s just playing. Sometimes she can play a little rough, that’s all,” he said softly, gently. “She’s not going to hurt me, and she won’t hurt you either.”

He looked over and beckoned to Vasha. She lowered her head all the way down close to them, and Kyven took Sunny’s hand and set it on her snout. “See? She’s not biting,” he said as Vasha snorted a little bit, pushing her nose against Sunny’s hand.

Kyven had Sunny pet Vasha until she got bored, then the Equar wandered back towards the other horses. Kyven laid back down and caught a quick nap, the Lupans laying down with him, but Sunny just sat near his small firepit quietly. Despite his brave front to Ebony, he *was* tired, very tired, and for the last two days, he’d been catching little cat naps whenever

and wherever he could manage it. Even a twenty minute nap while waiting for the Arcans to finish their formation march around the edges of the abandoned farmland helped.

He knew he was sleeping when he found his dream invaded by his spirit, the dream dissolving into shadow as she stalked out of them, her body twisting into solidity from them. He sat down on the dark nothing around him and offered his hand to her as she padded up to him, and she sat sedately beside him, wrapped her tail around her legs, then reached out a forepaw and put it in his hand. And in that touch, there was communication. *I am nearly finished with my work, she declared. If things go as I expect, tomorrow morning your new amulet will be ready. You will give your old one to Danna. It holds a piece of her humanity within, so it is best kept with her until she fulfills her part of our bargain. That way she knows exactly where it is, and it hanging around her neck motivates her properly,* she intoned dryly.

“I will do so, sister,” he nodded, again feeling that curious mixture of love and hate for his treacherous spirit rise up in him. “But I won’t be using it except in dire circumstances. The Arcans have to know that I’m a human, not secretly believe that I’m just an Arcan Shaman using a disguise.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Is Toby alright?”

He is fully recovered. I warned him that changing back would be unpleasant..

“I don’t remember it.”

You were unconscious when I changed you back. It was a blessing for you. Toby retains his shadow powers, as I promised.

“You told him they were part of him now,” he said. When she gave him a cool look, he could only laugh. “You’re keeping your claws in him.”

I would be a fool to completely let him go, she said shamelessly. He is too valuable. Toby is a truly exceptional man, my Shaman.

“No argument from me there,” he nodded in agreement.

He secretly revels in keeping them. He appreciates how useful they are.

“Anyone who has them wants to keep them,” Kyven said easily. “I meant to ask you, sister. The other day, I encountered something in the shadow world I’d never encountered before. It came from deeper within the shadow world, and the *things* scattered when it came closer to ours.”

Them, she noted, giving him a sober look. I suggest in the highest possible terms that you stay well away from those, my Shaman. They are as dangerous as they are malevolent.

“What are they?”

She just gave him a long, silent look.

He sighed. “Alright, I’ll figure it out myself,” he said with a hint of disapproval in his voice.

As it should be, she told him unflappably. Thus far, I am well pleased with your progress, my Shaman. Though I detest the methods you must use as much as you, I fully understand that you literally have no choice. You do what must be done.

“And that’s the only reason I can bring myself to do it,” he said with a low, weary voice. “I took no pleasure in sacking Parai, in killing innocent women and children, and I’ll enjoy what’s coming even less. The starvation. The pestilence. The misery.”

Take heart, my Shaman. You do what is best for all, even if it is not best for some. The Arcans you freed show the promise lurking within them. With more training and more experience, they will be a match for the soldiers they send against you.

“I hope so. We both believe that the Arcans have to *fight* for their freedom. Well, if this first group is any indication, then I think we have a good chance to succeed. If just half of the Arcans fight, by the time we reach Tallasar, we’ll have an army big enough to do the job, even after it splits up.”

When will you divide the army?

“After we sack Tallasar,” he replied. “Clover and Dancer will take a part of the army and go east, while me and Stalker go west. That way we can sweep completely across the rest of Flaur and Georvan while I bring my Arcans west to destroy Alamar and Nurys. I...don’t want my sisters to have to do that,” he said reluctantly. “Spirit’s love, not even *I* want to do it, but if it has to be done, then I’ll make sure that only those who can live with it actually do it. Stalker can handle what we have to do, but I don’t think my sisters would be able to live with themselves if I made them take part in that atrocity.”

You underestimate their strength, my Shaman.

“May be, but I won’t make them do it,” he said sternly. “I won’t *let* them do it.”

The entire world around them started to shudder and unravel. He became dimly aware of Ebony trying to awaken him. “I’m being woken up,” he warned.

I know. Continue on your path, my Shaman, and know that I am well pleased with your progress, she relayed, then she and everything around him shimmered and vanished—

—And Kyven’s eyes fluttered open. Ebony was kneeling beside him, her hand on his shoulder. The sky above was a darker blue, and he realized that it was nearly sunset. Ebony had let him sleep for *hours!* “It’s time to wake up, Shaman,” Ebony told him. “Danna is here.”

“Danna!” he said happily, jerking upright. Sunny still sat exactly where she’d been when he went to sleep, looking in his direction with her eyes

down. “Why didn’t you wake me up earlier! I wanted to greet her!”

“I told her you were too tired to greet her, and she understood,” Ebony answered shamelessly. “She worries about you too, Shaman. She knows you don’t get enough sleep.”

“Where is she?”

“With the other Shaman, talking with the Arcans,” she replied.

“How long has she been here?” he demanded, almost angry.

“Nearly half an hour,” she replied.

“You let me sleep with her here for *half an hour*?” he demanded, jerking himself to his feet as Sunny recoiled slightly away from him.

“You *needed* to sleep, Shaman,” Ebony declared. “You’ve laid there asleep with them *shooting muskets*! You were clearly exhausted!”

Kyven gave her an ugly look. “We’re gonna have a little talk later, Ebony,” he promised.

“Talk all you want, Shaman, I do only what’s best for you,” she replied with a proud stare right back at him, completely unintimidated.

Sunny looked up at Ebony, looking utterly flabbergasted that she would dare *defy* Kyven.

“Sunny, come with me, I want you to meet Danna,” he ordered, reaching his hand down. She hesitantly put her hand in his, and he helped her to her feet.

He almost dragged Sunny across the camp as he moved to where there was a group of Arcans, where he suspected they were, and he was right. Danna stood with Clover and Dancer, speaking to several in his army, and she looked radiantly beautiful. She had her hair pulled back away from her ears, wearing a simple wrap-like vest to contain her furry breasts and a little cloth tied around her hips to defend her modesty. Her belly was still flat, was showing no signs of her pregnancy yet, and that made her slim and

svelte and very sexy. Kyven had been attracted to her beautiful face and sexy body from the first time they met. She'd gotten less and less worried about clothes as she'd worn the fur, and Kyven could agree with her. Even though she'd learned how to cover her clothes with her shadow form and thus no longer needed to take them off when shadow walking, she had remarked more than once that the fur almost felt like clothes, that going without clothes as an Arcan didn't make her feel *naked*. Kyven could agree with that observation, though as a male, had a lot more hanging out in view that just a pair of nipples...not that it bothered him anymore. Ever since leaving Atan, Kyven had become quite the nudist. He could take his clothes off and parade up and down the street of any human city bare-ass naked and not feel the least bit self-conscious. Her eyes brightened and she opened her arms, and he buried her in a powerful hug, picking her up off her feet and swinging her back and forth. "Hey baby," she said happily. "Did you just wake up?"

"Why didn't you wake me up, Danna?" he demanded.

"I came over, but you looked so tired, I just let you sleep," she told him, then she laughed when he jabbed her in the side irritably. He kissed her on the side of the muzzle, then put his arms around her waist. "So, how do things look?"

"Pretty good, from what they've been telling me, you've set up your army much like we did ours," she replied. "And I brought that tent for you. Nightfall and Toby helped me with the other things, but I sent them back to the army. They're keeping an eye on things up there."

"Sounds good. Danna, did you meet Sunny? I've sorta adopted her for now, until she feels comfortable enough to be on her own."

"Ebony told me about that when I saw her at your campsite, but we didn't talk. Hello, Sunny," she said, which Kyven had to translate, Kyven letting her out of his arms so she could offer her hand. Sunny looked *stunned* as she gawked at Danna, and Danna didn't miss it. "You're surprised that I'm an Arcan?" she asked easily. Kyven himself was

impressed at how *casually* she said that as he translated. She'd truly become comfortable in her fur.

"Y-Yes, ma'am," she said.

Danna chuckled. "Well, Kyven's a pervert, so you shouldn't be all that surprised," she teased.

"You're the one marrying me, woman," he warned. "So my perversion must turn you on."

She gasped and smacked him on the shoulder, which caused a few chuckles once they heard the translation from a laughing Clover.

Kyven walked with her as she talked to the Arcans making up the army, Kyven or one of the Noravi speakers translating for her, Sunny following behind them, hearing about the sacking of Parai from those who had participated, from their point of view. She didn't react negatively when they told her about how many humans died in the attack, including women and children, because she knew what Kyven was doing and knew that it was going to happen. She reviewed a training session as Arcans fired muskets in a line, getting experience with the weapons, then watched as a group of sergeants practiced aiming with their new shockrods, thunderclaps adding to the din of musket fire. "You realize that you're going to have a language problem when you cross over into Georvan," Danna told him.

"We're already planning for it," Kyven replied. "We have *some* Noravi speakers here, they're going to teach the Flauren Arcans some basic Noravi. We're going to run into the same problem when we hit Nurys. Those Arcans will primarily only speak Cajar. That's half the reason I'm going to be the one attacking Nurys, because I can talk to them."

She nodded as Clover translated the conversation to their little entourage. "And when are you pulling out of this camp? I thought you said you have to move fast."

"We do, but our Arcans *need* some basic training before we keep going," he replied. "I hated making them attack Parai with no training and

no experience, but they really proved themselves by doing it so well. These Arcans will form the core of the army we build, and they'll be training the Arcans we free as we move. We're going to stay here one more day, that's all the time we have, then we move. We'll be moving back to the east and attacking the plantations north of King's Garden, then hitting Canverra and the three other small villages along the coast road up to Kennio. From there we'll more or less be zig-zagging up the peninsula to sack the plantations and small villages along the way. The peninsula doesn't get so wide that that tactic becomes untenable until we get to around Okena. When we get there, the main host will be attacking the towns while raiding parties will be dispatched out to attack the small villages and plantations, and they'll be mainly doing it at night. At night, a party of just twenty Arcans can wipe out all resistance at a plantation, sack it, and free the Arcans with little danger to themselves."

"Sounds like you have a good plan," she nodded professionally. "What happens when you reach one of the cities?"

"Sack it," he replied easily. "The only walled city in Flaur is Tallasar, and most every Flauren town is made of wooden buildings," he told her. "Even if they can somehow repel us, they can't save the town when we burn it to the ground. It's hard to put out fires when you're being shot at," he added dryly.

"And you think you'll draw DeVaur back to Flaur?"

"Once we burn Orlann to the ground, you bet your cute ass it will," he declared, which made several of them laugh when Clover translated it word for word. "So you only have to hold him off until we reach Orlann, love. If you can hold Atan until then, DeVaur will be forced to withdraw. If he blows off a royal command to return to Flaur, he'll be executed for treason."

"You're assuming we can't deal with him up in the Territories," she grinned.

“If it was just DeVaur, I’d have no question you could. But when they see how big your army really is, love, the armies fighting each other will see you as a much bigger threat. They’ll form a temporary alliance to destroy you, because the idea of an army of half a million armed Arcans would scare the piss out of most of them. It’ll go from fighting over crystals to a simple matter of humanity protecting itself against the Arcan threat,” he said dryly. “That’s why I’ve had you conceal the size of the army as much as possible, to *prevent* that for as long as you possibly can. As long as you’re facing a disparate group of enemies too busy fighting each other to pose a threat, you’re fine. But when they decide you’re the greater threat and ally against you, you’re going to have your back against the wall.”

“We have a plan, Kyven, don’t worry,” she assured him with a toothy smile.

“And I’m confident it’s a good one,” he said, putting his arm around her.

After Danna’s tour, he had to leave her for a little while, because he had business to tend. As she caught up with Clover and Dancer, Kyven shadow walked halfway across Noraam, stepping out of the shadow of a barn in the small village of Vanguard. The air was decidedly chilly, and there was snow lingering in the shadowed area behind the barn. Winter came *very* early that far north, and they’d already had their first snow of the year. It had already been mostly melted off by the late autumn sun, but in a matter of a couple of weeks, the temperature would drop below freezing, and it wouldn’t climb back above it until next spring. Kyven went straight to the town’s central hall, not garnering much attention since there were a couple dozen humans living in the village, but he was definitely noticed when he entered. Rainsong laughed and hurried up to him, giving him a fond hug. “Kyven! Brother, it’s so good to see you!” the short, willowy cougar told him. “What brings you to Vanguard, brother?”

“I came for the letters Andra wrote to her parents,” he replied. “Where is she?”

“Upstairs, recovering,” she replied. “She just returned from her training a little bit ago. I gave her a healthy meal and just put her to bed before you came in.”

“How is that going?”

“She will be done with her training soon, then brother white wolf will begin teaching her wisdom,” she replied. “I have to say, brother, her determination surprises me.”

“You’ll find her to be a very willful girl, sister. That’s why I think she’ll be such a good Shaman.”

Kyven went up to her small room, and found her all but passed out in her pallet. She was awake but listless, and Kyven could almost sense the magic about her, the Blessing that was already working to build her back up after she nearly worked herself to death. That was what it felt like, Kyven remembered most keenly, and was probably the best description of it. The training regimen to prepare a human Shaman would kill most humans that tried it, and it turned those who survived it into beings of superhuman strength and endurance. Even though Kyven didn’t exercise as much as he should, he was still twice as strong as most men and could run a horse to death. Kyven’s conditioning made him more *Arcan* than *human* in some ways. The incredible physical demands of the magic he used required it. “Kyven,” she said with a weak smile, a trembling hand raising towards him.

He chuckled and quickly came over, kneeling by her pallet and taking her hand. “Rest, you silly girl,” he told her gently, brushing her silver-white hair away from her face. “Rainsong says you’ll be done with this soon.”

“I’ll be *so* happy,” she said in that weak whisper. “I think I’m going to die this time.”

He laughed. “I thought that every single day,” he assured her. “As promised, sister, I’m here to collect your letters. I’ll deliver them to your parents tonight, and tomorrow I’ll bring their letters to you. Where are they?”

She pointed with a trembling hand to her writing desk. He went over to her desk and found a series of folded papers, and collected them up and showed them to her. "Are these all of them?" he asked, and when she nodded, he tucked them into his satchel. "I'll let you rest, sister. We can talk tomorrow when I bring your parents' letters," he said, leaning down and kissing her on the forehead. "I'll try to be here early, so you can read them before you start your day's training, alright?"

"Okay," she replied, her eyes struggling to stay open.

"It's time for you to sleep. Sweet dreams, my sister, and I'll see you in the morning."

She closed her eyes without protest, and almost immediately fell asleep.

He went back downstairs, where Rainsong was cleaning up the last of the dinner dishes. She smiled and wiped her hands on her apron when he came into the kitchen. "Is she sleeping, brother?"

He nodded. "Now I know what I looked like when I was doing that," he said, then he chuckled. "How goes things in Vanguard, sister?"

He spared a good half hour or so to catch up with Rainsong, whom he did rather like, helping her put her dishes away as she described the war effort, how caravans left carrying supplies for the army went through the village daily, starting out from Haven with Arcan porters carrying heavy loads on their backs to deliver to Atan. Duplicated Briton rifles, the smaller ones, were now in those shipments of food and other war supplies, and Rainsong rather proudly showed off her very own Colt 1911 pistol, which she kept in a pouch in her room. They'd been doing as Kyven suggested, getting one of those pistols to every Shaman as an emergency backup weapon, even the Shaman holding down the fort back at home like Rainsong. She did have a rather curious question as they finished up the last of the dishes. "How do you use *two* of them?" she asked, looking at his weapon belt. "They're not slung so you can pull both with a single hand."

He laughed. “Yeah, I use one in each hand when I fall back on them, which I do *way* more than most other Shaman. I dunno, it just seems natural to me,” he told her.

“I tried shooting it from my left hand when Steelclaw came down here to deliver mine and show me how to use it. I wasn’t very good.”

“Just takes practice, sister,” he assured her. “But I’m glad to see them getting to the Shaman.”

“All of us wanted one as soon as we heard about them. Finally, a dependable and powerful weapon for us that will work inside a grounding field.”

“Exactly,” he nodded.

“If you don’t mind, can I see the original?”

He unholstered it immediately and offered it. “Be careful, it’s loaded,” he warned.

She took it and held it very carefully, looking at the elaborate etchings on the barrel and the ornate grips. “Very fancy,” she noted.

“It was the weapon of a general, I guess he had to make it ostentatious,” he said dryly. “But it was designed to be used in combat, and it works *very* well. I’ve already used it in battle.”

“I’ve heard, the word is reaching us back here. They said you sacked a Flauren city.”

He nodded. “Parai. Right now the Arcans I’ve freed are undergoing a crash course in fighting, then we’ll sweep out and march up the peninsula, freeing every Arcan we can find along the way.”

“I wish I could be there to help you, brother.”

“No, sister, you do *not* want to be with me right now,” he said sternly. “Part of what I’m doing is trying to draw the human armies back to the south to take the pressure off Danna and our own army, so I haven’t been

gentle. We didn't just sack Parai, we burned it to the ground, killed half its inhabitants, and scattered the survivors."

"This is war, brother. War is never gentle," she said sagely.

"Well said, sister," he said as she handed the pistol back to him, and he returned it to its holster. "I'd better get back," he said. "Danna is waiting for me, and I'd like to spend some time with her before I start tonight's tasks."

"You'll be back tomorrow?" she asked, and when he nodded, she smiled. "I'll make a nice breakfast for you."

"I'd appreciate that," he chuckled, leaning down and kissing her on the side of the muzzle. "I'll let myself out, sister. See you tomorrow."

"Safe journey, brother."

Kyven did leave the hall before he prepared to shadow walk out, to get a look at a caravan settling in for the night so they could leave early in the morning...and that turned out to be a mistake. He stepped down off the porch, not paying much attention, when out of nowhere someone slammed into him. The sky and ground traded places a couple of times before he found himself on his back, and a very angry striped cat was straddling his stomach, smacking him on the head with both hands as she cursed loudly and sulfurously, saying more than she'd probably said in a year. Kyven finally managed to identify his attacker was *Lightfoot*...what was she doing in Vanguard? She shouldn't even be halfway back to Haven by now, she'd only left the army to return a few days ago! He finally got hold of her hands, using his strength to quell her slaps, and she snarled at him and looked ready to lunge down and bite him. "Lightfoot! What the hell are you doing *here*?"

"I'm where you made them put me!" she raged. "Danna *walked* me back to Haven in the middle of the night because I refused to leave!"

He gave her a look, then burst out laughing, and then he saw spots when she got a hand free and punched him in the face. She was not gentle. "Take me *back*!" she demanded. "Take me back *now*!"

“Woah, wait, wait,” he pleaded, grabbing her hand again, then glancing up to see the calico Lucky coming over, and he was grinning. “Lightfoot, you are *pregnant*. You’re where you need to be. Your babies need you. Lucky needs you.”

“Do I *look* helpless to you?” she snapped, her teeth clenched and her eyes hot. “Does Lucky look helpless, Kyven? We spent the last four days getting here to join a caravan going back to Atan. I will *not* sit up here and be useless when Haven needs us in Noraam!”

“You were going back?” he asked in surprise.

“Of *course* we were going back, you idiot!” she snapped, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt with both hands. “I trained my whole life for this moment, to protect my people and Haven from the humans, and you *sent me home!*” she screamed, pulling his shoulders up off the ground and then slamming them back down. “And you were too cowardly to do it yourself, you had *Danna* do it!”

“I didn’t know she walked you back here, but that was pretty damn clever,” he said lightly, which incited an angry growl deep in Lightfoot’s throat. “But I didn’t do it to be an ass, Lightfoot. I did it because I *care* about you, about you and Lucky. I wanted you to have the chance to have the kind of life that you deserve,” he told her gently. “You’ve done *enough*, friend. You got us to Avannar, and now you have other, more important duties,” he said, putting a hand on her belly meaningfully. “*This* is far more important to me than how invaluable you are as a scout, a warrior, and a friend. This is your future, Lightfoot. I wanted you to *have* that future, to see your babies born, to watch them grow up, to be the mate and mother that was your right since the day you were born.”

Her eyes softened a little, but then her snarl returned. “I won’t get big enough to have problems for *months*,” she told him in a low growl. “You will take us back, Kyven, and we will stay with *you*, not with Danna. She told me what you’re doing, and you need us. You need Lucky to keep Vasha

under control. You need me to help you teach our brothers and sisters how to fight.”

“One person won’t make a difference, Lightfoot.”

“It makes a difference to *me*,” she hissed, putting her pert little cat nose right against his.

“You’d better do what she wants, Kyven,” Lucky said lightly.

“Where do you stand in this, Lucky?” Kyven asked, looking up over Lightfoot’s bone white hair at him.

“I go where she goes, Shaman, always,” he said simply.

“And you have no opinion at all?”

“I want to go back,” he replied. “We started this, and we want to *finish* it. You pulled me out of that cage, Shaman, when I didn’t have much longer. You saved my life, you brought me to Lightfoot, and I owe you, the other Shaman, and Haven more than I can ever repay. I could say that *you’ve* done enough too, but where are you? You’re risking your neck out there, and you’re doing it for *us*. I’d be a complete ass if I just hid in Haven and let you do my fighting for me.”

He laid there, letting go of her wrists, and considered it...and the pissed-off expression on Lightfoot’s face put a lot of weight on his consideration. She was *really* mad that he pulled her out of the fight, madder than he thought she’d be. He figured she’d bluster about it a few days, then the reality of her pregnancy would settle in and her maternal instincts would take over. But the look on her face made it clear that she meant *business*.

She’d done exactly what Lucky had done when Kyven left him behind. Danna had tricked her to get her to Haven, and here she was in Vanguard, getting ready to go right back to Noraam. He couldn’t *make* her stay here, though the month it would take her to get back to Noraam would be a month in the relative safety of the wilderness, not in the thick of battle. He

could always just let her get back to Noraam and then put her right back in Haven over and over until she got the hint...but from the look on her face, if he ever dared do that, she'd find some way to get her revenge on him, and it would be *ugly*.

“On two conditions,” he said calmly, looking up at them. “One, I bring you to my army as a *scout* and a *trainer*, not a fighter,” he declared. “You will only fight if the base camp or the noncombatants are threatened, because you are pregnant and I want to protect your babies as much as possible, even if *you* don’t. Two, when you *do* get to big, I bring you back here, and you *stay* here,” he declared. “And it’s not up for negotiation. You take it or you walk back on your own, and I’ll do everything in my power to make sure you don’t stay there long. You know me, Lightfoot, you know that *everything in my power* includes some pretty dirty tricks. And I’ll use them *all*.”

She snarled, but she did let go of his collar and rise up, staring down at him as she thought about it. “Mate?” she said simply, looking to Lucky.

“I’d take it, love,” Lucky replied. “You know how much of a cheater he is.”

“I can certainly use *you*, Lucky. You speak Flauren, and I’m gonna need translators when we reach Georvan.”

“I’ll do what I can, Shaman. And I can translate for her when she teaches the Arcans.”

Lightfoot slashed her tail, Kyven felt it snake over his feet and ankles, then she got up off him with a graceful, fluid motion. “Alright,” she said, staring down at him with her feet on either side of his stomach, a move that left little to Kyven’s imagination as he looked up her unclad body. She had only her weapon belt, which now included two Colt pistols like his and a shockrod. She stepped over him and reached a clawed hand down for him. He took it, and she helped him up. “Mate, we need rope.”

“I have some in our pack,” he nodded. “I’ll go get our things.”

“Mate, eh?” Kyven asked lightly when the young calico ran towards a tent encampment on the north side of the village, where the porters had been setting up camp in preparation for tomorrow, when they would be starting their journey out into the wilderness.

“He deserved it,” she replied, reverting back to her silent ways now that she wasn’t so angry. “Thank you.”

“I’m going against my better judgment here, Lightfoot. I’d *really* prefer you stay here,” he told her honestly. “I don’t want to lose you, or have you lose Lucky.”

“Our place is with you, protecting our people,” she said simply.

“At least I wrung concessions out of you. And I’ll hold you to them,” he warned. “If I catch you sneaking out to fight, I’ll send you home. Don’t think I won’t. I’m going to keep you as safe as possible given what we’re doing. I *will* see your babies born, Lightfoot, even if I have to babysit you.”

She gave him a slight smile, but said nothing.

They’d walked before, so Kyven didn’t have to explain things to them. They both did very well in what was for them the utter chaos of the shadow world, where their real bodies distorted the fabric of the shadows and twisted everything around. The *things* sensed them and moved in Kyven’s direction as he took them the nine steps back to the army, but they had still yet to feel as if they could counter his newest defense against them, so they only lurked, watching, studying, waiting for the right time.

Danna was honestly surprised when she saw Lightfoot and Lucky. She’d sensed him arrive before he came out of the shadows, and her eyes widened when Lucky came out right behind him, then Lightfoot. “You told me to send them to Haven, and you bring them *back*?” she demanded.

“It was bring them back or lose teeth,” he said, rubbing his jaw. “They were in *Vanguard*, love, getting ready to come back to Atan with a caravan.”

Danna gave Lightfoot a hot look. “*What?* I told you to stay *there!*”

Lightfoot only stared at her.

“So, to prevent them from just showing up in Atan in a couple of weeks and turning it into a running fight, I made Lightfoot promise to stay off the front lines if I brought her here,” he explained. “I think I’m going to put her in charge of the protection of the base camp,” he speculated. “She’ll have responsibility for the safety of the noncombatants. She’s also going to help Fastpaw scout and train the Arcans we free, and Lucky’s going to be a translator and help Striker with Vasha. Vasha likes him. I’m not happy with this, but it’s better than the alternative.”

“This is where we belonged in the first place,” Lucky told them. “Kyven needs me, and Kyven needs Lightfoot too.”

“And when Lightfoot gets too big to move around easily, she promised to let me take them back to Haven and *stay* there,” he said sternly, giving her a look.

Danna gave Lightfoot a hot look. “I can’t believe you, Lightfoot. You’re *pregnant!*”

“So are you,” she accused.

Danna spluttered a bit. “Well, I’m not on the front lines, either! And I *will* be going to Haven when I’m too big to move around! Danvers will take over when I have to leave!”

“Then don’t be a hypocrite,” Lightfoot said with surprising vehemence in her voice. “You stay, I stay. You go, I go.”

Danna put her hands on her hips and glared at the small, dangerous little cat. “I think she has you there, love,” Kyven said lightly.

“I thought you were against this!” Danna said, pointing at him.

“I am, but at least this way she’s off the front lines and where I can keep an eye on her,” he said evenly.

“Enough talk,” Lightfoot snorted. “Show us your camp, Shaman. We can set up.”

“Just moving right in, are we?” Kyven chuckled.

“Yes,” she replied immediately, yanking on the rope still tied around Kyven’s waist and making him wheeze.

Though he wasn’t happy she was here, he *was* happy to have her around. Lightfoot, like Clover, was one of his oldest friends, and she was solid and dependable. Kyven called all the officers of his fledgling army together after Lucky and Lightfoot moved in, setting up their tent beside his, and Kyven introduced her to them. “Friends, this is Lightfoot and her mate, Lucky,” Kyven said, motioning to the small striped cat and her calico mate. “They’re very old friends of mine that convinced me to bring them down here. Lightfoot is, quite simply, one of the best fighters that Haven can put on the field,” he said honestly. “She was born and raised in Haven, the daughter of former fighting Arcans, and they taught her how to fight. But, she also happens to be pregnant at the moment, so she can’t really be on the front lines with the army to the north. Instead, she convinced me to bring her here. Friends, from this day on, Lightfoot will be the officer in charge of the protection of the base camp and our Arcan brothers and sisters who either cannot or do not fight both in the camp and on the move,” he declared, as Lucky quietly translated for her, whispering in her ear. “She’s also going to be training you how to fight and helping Fastpaw train the scouts in their duties. Mind, all of you, that she doesn’t speak Flauren,” he warned. “Her mate Lucky *does*, however, and most of the time, they’re going to be together. Friends, you’re not going to find many better than Lightfoot. I suggest in the highest possible terms that you listen to her and you *learn* from her. She rarely speaks, but when she does speak, you *listen*.”

The Arcans all gave the small cat curious, assessive looks.

“I know, she’s not very big. But you’re going to discover that size isn’t everything,” Kyven said with a slight smile. “Now, since Danna is here and

Lightfoot just joined us, I guess this is a good time to go over what's going to happen once we break camp tomorrow and begin our mission in earnest."

He turned and raised his hands, and an illusory map of southern Flaur appeared, showing all the plantations, towns, and villages interspersed in the large pine forest that dominated the southern sections of the peninsula. "Friends, tomorrow afternoon, when we break camp, it's going to be the start of a very long, very arduous, very tiring journey," he began, hearing Lucky translate quietly for Danna and Lightfoot. "I've already planned out our routes to maximize the damage we can cause in the shortest amount of time, and that will include us taking on the first expeditionary force from the Flauren Army, which we should encounter about right here," he told them, causing a flashing red light to appear on his illusory map. "Friends, you already know what we're going to do. We're going to destroy anything and everything in our path, leave the humans with no homes, no food, no supplies, leave them wandering refugees in search of a safe place. To protect our Arcan fighters as much as possible from the humans starting to organize defense in every single town and village we destroy, we'll have to move quickly. The key to this strategy, my friends, is *speed*."

"Simply put, friends, we are going to outrun the ability of the humans to spread news of what we're doing. We can move faster than the humans, even the humans on horseback. Those horses have to rest. We *don't*. After tonight's rest, none of us are going to spend more than six hours standing still," he warned. "We will sleep only as much as absolutely necessary, and the rest of the time, we're going to be on the move. Everything we do once we begin will be based on speed. We bring only what we can easily carry. The horses we add to the host will only be those that can keep up with us, the hardest of the stock. We will always be moving, friends, always advancing, because that is how we're going to stay ahead of the refugees, and in front of the spreading word of what we're doing."

"I can't stress it enough, friends, that our success absolutely depends on our speed," he said seriously. "The faster we go, the better the chance we catch the humans by surprise, and the more of our Arcan brothers and sisters we save. By constantly moving, constantly being far ahead of where

any of the humans that *do* know of us will expect us to be, it keeps them from trying to trap us, and it also minimizes the chance that they decide to kill all the Arcans we're trying to free to prevent us from taking them. If they don't know we're coming, they can't kill our brothers and sisters to prevent us from freeing them. By staying ahead of the spreading news, staying ahead of the preparations for our arrival, it's going to allow us to strike relatively undefended towns and villages and free as many of the Arcans as possible.

“But that strategy is only going to work in the short term,” he warned. “When we attack and destroy Orlann, we'll rouse the king to warn the entirety of Flaur about us, and then we're going to start running into defended towns and plantations. Right now, the king knows what we did to Parai, but he isn't making it public knowledge to avoid causing a panic in the southern towns. He believes that the army he's dispatched from Orlann can track us down and destroy us. He's *underestimating* you, brothers and sisters,” he said with a smile. “When the king does finally decide to warn all of Flaur about us, I'm going to be dealing with the biggest advantage they have, talkers. I have a plan to disable every talker in Flaur. Without the ability to use talkers, there's no way the Flaurens can keep track of us and prepare our targets for our arrival. They won't know where we are or where we're going, and that's going to let us strike with much more chance of success.

“But I should warn you now, friends, so you're ready for it. We can't save *everyone*,” he said grimly. “We are going to miss Arcans. We're going to sack villages and plantations where they've already killed them to prevent us from freeing them. Prepare for the day that you see it,” he told them soberly. “But the plan I've made will give us the best chance to free as many Arcans as possible, and I firmly believe that by the time we reach Tallasar, we'll have such a large army that we can raze it to the ground, kill the king, destroy the Barrista, and bring righteous justice down upon all of Flaur for their enslavement of the Arcan people,” he said, which made many of them give little cheers and raise their fists.

“The way we’re going to do this so we’re constantly in front of any word of us without driving the army to exhaustion is by taking advantage of our greatest strengths, friends, and that is speed and endurance,” he said. “We’re going to break the army into three major sections, two divisions of raiders and the main body, which will hold all of our non-combatants and most of our equipment. At any one time, one of the fighting divisions will be well ahead of the main host, attacking plantations and villages, while the second division rests in reserve and holds the campsite for the main host, that will come up behind us. Fighters will rotate from the raiding divisions back into the main host to protect it and back again in stages so they can rest and recuperate, since the main host won’t be moving as fast as the raiding divisions. But even the main host is going to be moving fast and traveling long distances without rest, so that’s rest compared to the exertion of being in the raiding divisions. The two fighting divisions are going to be utilizing the mobility advantage we possess to range out and destroy large swaths of human territory, moving even faster than the main host. They will advance out, sack human settlements and free Arcans, bring everything they plunder and the Arcans they free back to a central point, then rest as the second division passes them to continue the advance. The main host will come up behind them, absorb the freed Arcans and plundered supplies into the host, and then the fighting division will run out to take the lead once again as the second division concentrates on sacking human settlements,” he explained, using the illusory map to provide visual examples of his plan. “The main host will carry all supplies and equipment and resupply the fighting divisions when they catch up to them. By using this leapfrog tactic, it keeps us constantly in front of any messengers or refugees that escape from the human settlements we sack, range out to attack large swaths of human territory while the main host moves in a straight line and with purpose, yet also allows our fighting divisions to get enough rest to continue the advance. While we’re on the move, it will be absolutely critical for us to either kill or capture every horse, mule, donkey, oxen, anything with a saddle on it and a human riding it we find to keep mounted messengers from getting in front of us. Also, while we are on the move, *any* human you encounter riding a mount must die, be it man, woman, or child,

and if you can't bring the mount with you, then you kill it as well. We cannot let a single messenger get outside of our advancing perimeter, friends, else the Flaurens can organize a response, and that makes our jobs much, much harder."

"Shaman, how are you going to deal with the talkers?" one of his sergeants asked, the large female canine.

"I have an alchemist friend working on it right now," he replied. "He's building a device that will be able to do the job. It will permanently disable every talker for five hundred minars in every direction, which is most all of Flaur, *including* our own talkers," he warned. "That isn't the *only* thing that device can do, but when he gets it to us, that's going to be its first use. But that's a small price to pay for preventing our enemies from using them to coordinate ahead of us."

"That explains why you've not been taking advantage of using talkers thus far," Clover mused.

Kyven nodded. "I don't want the army to get used to using them, only to lose them when I use the device to destroy them."

"What else can it do?" Dancer asked him.

"That device? Simply put, sister, it can do *anything*," he replied honestly. "Without going into detail, what the device does is reach into reality *itself* and changes a single thing about reality. What it can do depends entirely on the will of who uses it, or the combined wills of everyone focusing on it as someone else uses it. That device is our queen's jack in a game of king's cross. If things get too hairy, we can fall back on the device to alter reality itself in some small way that eliminates the advantage of an enemy or provides an advantage to our own people. The stronger the will of those who focus on the device, the larger the change in reality that can be made. It couldn't do something like kill every human in Flaur or change the ground into taffy, that's too much of a change in reality, but what it *could* do is, say, prevent every musket in the device's range from

being able to fire, by making a tiny change to reality itself to make it impossible for the muskets to work.”

“Like how?”

“Like using the device so that in the reality the device projects, gunpowder doesn’t burn,” he replied easily, looking at the speaker. “The device will affect *us* as well as *them*, so what we do has to be carefully considered so it doesn’t hamstring our own fighters along with the enemy. The device’s abilities are dependent completely on the willpower of the user and the combined willpower of those helping the user. If your will is strong enough, you can use the device to alter reality itself within the device’s range, either temporarily or permanently, depending on what you’re trying to do. Eventually, once the Flaurens start ordering the mass execution of Arcans in front of us, I’ll use the device to destroy every mana crystal in its range, which will deactivate the collars and render all their alchemical weaponry inert. But I’ll hold back on doing that until I have to, since that will affect *us* as well. We’ll use our alchemical devices to our advantage as long as we can, then when the time comes that we have to remove them to give our Arcan brothers and sisters a fighting chance by freeing them of their collars, we do it.”

“Amazing!” one of his corporals gasped.

“It’s actually very simple, but it’s not easy to do. The user has to understand the nature of reality itself, that reality is not set, that it can be *changed* if the user has the willpower to do so. That’s why I have one of the best alchemists alive building the device,” he replied. “It has to be *perfect* to work, and if I need perfection in an alchemical device, then I need Virren Bandar to build it,” he said with pride in his friend.

“With such a device on our side, we can’t lose!” another sergeant said with a confident smile.

“We *can* lose, but only if we get cocky,” Kyven corrected him. “The device will be our weapon of last resort, Grimclaw. We only use it if we have no other option, because of the incredible danger that it can pose to *us*

as well as *them*. One tiny mistake when using the device, and we might accidentally change something that allows the humans to overrun our fighters and kill us all. Even the tiniest change to reality can have unforeseen effects that change other things in ways that we may not expect. Reality is a very complicated thing, friends, and you don't make even the smallest change to it without being very, very careful. So it will only be used when it *must* be used, and only as much as needed to accomplish its task."

Grimclaw gave him a surprised look, then nodded in understanding.

"So I want all of you to go back to your companies and explain the basics to them, and stress that we are going to be moving long distances very fast every day without rest, to stay in front of the word that spreads behind us. I want everyone to be ready for it. So tell everyone to get as much rest as possible tonight and tomorrow," he called. "If you're not in a training session, then I want you to rest. Tomorrow I'll go into more detail about our plan, but for now, I want you to filter down our basic strategy to the others so they know what to expect."

The meeting broke up, and the Shaman, his nannies, Lightfoot, and Lucky gathered around him. "Well, Lightfoot?" he asked in Noravi, looking at her.

"Smart," she replied. "It will work."

"It plays to our strengths, and if you truly can disable every talker in Flaur, it will make it impossible for them to catch up to us," Stalker agreed. "We'll be moving faster than the messengers trying to spread word of our actions. The messengers will arrive at towns and villages that have already been destroyed."

"Exactly," Kyven nodded. "The humans have *no idea* just how fast an Arcan army can move. We're going to use it to maximum effect by outrunning the word that spreads behind us. Brother, sisters, I'm going to need something from you before we get started."

“What, brother?”

“A crystal. It has to be blue, fifty points in weight, and absolutely flawless,” he warned. “And I’ll need it before we start moving. It’s going to power the device Virren’s building for me.”

“I can make such a crystal, brother,” Clover assured him. “It will be ready before we break camp tomorrow evening.”

“Alright then. Lightfoot, go ahead and look around, decide how you’re going to handle defending the host while on the move, and talk to Fastpaw to arrange the scouts. You’ll be handling the scouting for the host while Fastpaw handles scouting for the advance elements. Lucky, stay with her, only a handful of Arcans in the host speak Noravi. She’s going to need you.”

“Always, Shaman,” he said with a smile, taking Lightfoot’s hand.

“I’m going to go out and study the territory more, make sure everything is where I think it is and they don’t have any nasty surprises waiting for us. Then I’ll be going to Eusica to deliver Andra’s letters and bringing their letters back. I should be back tomorrow morning. Plan with the army that we break camp and start out an hour before sunset. From then on, we move eighteen hours a day, and we move *fast*,” he warned. “I’ll have our initial route and attack plans ready for you to look over in the morning, after I take a final look at things.”

“We’ll get everything ready so you can rest,” Clover told him. “I take it that one of us will be with each of the advance elements?”

He nodded. “With two Shaman defending the host, and we’ll be rotating in and out of the advance elements so we can get more rest than we’d get at the vanguard. So take that into account, Lightfoot. You’ll have two Shaman with the host at all times.”

She nodded silently.

“Once the army has experience with the strategy, the Shaman in the vanguard will be attacking the most difficult targets, where the army may need our magic,” he told them. “But we’ll allow our Arcans to attack most of the tiny villages and plantations without us there, the targets where they’ll encounter little resistance. Once they know what to do, they’ll do just fine. We’ll only need to stay with them for the first few days, and I’ve taken that into account in the planning. The vanguard elements will be staying mostly together for the first few days, and once they have experience with attacking plantations and villages, we’ll let them take care of the small targets while we concentrate on the big ones.”

“Again, smart,” Stalker nodded in agreement. “They only need some way to remove the collars.”

“I already took care of that,” Danna said. “Part of what I brought were a bunch of handheld grounders, the kind that kill the crystals on top of stopping the magic. Now I see what they’re for.”

Kyven nodded. “That’s how our Arcans are going to get the collars off. That kind of grounder will kill *any* collar, even the exotic ones that most keys won’t open. That way they can just bring the Arcans back to the host where they can get them cut off.” He reached out and took Danna’s clawed hand. “But first things first, friends. Until I leave a couple hours after sunset, nobody better try to come into my tent, else you’re gonna embarrass Danna to death,” he said with a bright smile, which caused a few chuckles from his friends.

“Oh really? And just who decided this?” Danna challenged.

“I did, and tell me the idea of putting more scars on my back doesn’t appeal to you,” he retorted.

The fur on her cheeks ruffled, then she laughed helplessly.

“Remember, grip, fine. Pull, fine. Just don’t grip *and* pull,” Clover said with a sly smile, which earned her a smack on the shoulder.

“I’ll be close by in case you need healing, brother,” Dancer grinned.

“If I’m not bleeding when it’s over, I didn’t try hard enough,” he declared, which caused all of them to laugh loudly as he dragged Danna towards his tent.

It was sunrise when Kyven stepped out of the shadows and into the small village of Andra’s parents. There was a thin mist in the air, clinging to the trunks of the huge trees that made up the forest that surrounded their small hamlet. Everything was exactly as he remembered it, their vine and moss-covered houses a tiny bit hazy in the thin mist, the sound of a dog barking in the distance. Villagers were already out and about, getting the early morning chores out of the way while others had already left for their fields. Kyven had stepped out of the shadows near to Andra’s old house, and he had to smile a little bit when he saw Andra’s mother, Darda, humming to herself as she knelt at the side of the house and picked what looked like small green peppers from the little garden there. It looked to be the last of her little garden’s harvest, for the rest of it had been picked clean and prepared for winter. He advanced towards her, then called her name when he came close. She looked up suddenly and gave him a surprised look, quickly getting to her feet and picking up the wicker basket into which she was placing the small green peppers. “You!” she blurted.

“It’s the full moon, Mistress Darda,” he said in flawless Gaulish. “As promised, I’ve brought you Andra’s letters, and I’ve come for the ones you’ve written.”

“You speak Gaulish!”

“I do now,” he replied with a nod. “The spirits granted me the knowledge of your language while I was away, so I could talk to you.”

“Well, that was nice of them,” she said. “I wasn’t expecting you back so soon.”

“Or at all?” he asked pointedly, which made her flush a tiny bit. “A Shaman’s word is his bond, Mistress Darda. We *never* go back on a deal

fairly bargained.” He held up his small satchel. “I hope you have a lot of free time, I think Andra wrote you fifty letters.”

Darda laughed. “She must have plenty of free time to write so many.”

“Trust me, honored mother, she’s a very busy girl at the moment,” he said dryly. “Where’s Master Jallack?”

“He’s at work, Master Kyven. He’s the village smith.”

“That explains why he’s so big and muscular,” Kyven chuckled. “I think it would be proper for me to go pay my respects. Would you be so kind as to take me there?”

“Of course,” she smiled.

She led him through the small village and towards one of the only buildings in it that wasn’t covered in vines and moss, a stout stone building that had smoke rising up from the hearty chimney, the chimney of the forge. Three men were laboring inside, and Jallack wasn’t hard to miss, since he was so big. The other two men were much younger, probably his apprentices. Jallack stopped hammering on a long piece of glowing iron when Darda brought him under the eaves of the open pavilion-style work area by the smithy, so they could enjoy relatively fresh, cooler air as they worked. “He *did* come back,” Jallack blurted in his deep voice.

“I honor my bargains, Master Jallack,” Kyven said in fluent Gaulish, which made Jallack’s black brow rise in surprise. “Yes, I speak your language now. Shaman magic is very versatile,” he explained. “I’ve brought Andra’s letters, and I’m here to take your letters back to her.”

“Take over, Louen,” he said. The older of the two men came over and took his hammer, then he stepped away from his anvil. Kyven followed the huge man back towards his house. “How does our daughter fare?”

“Right now she’s still going through the physical training,” he answered. “But Rainsong, her Shaman mentor, says she should be finished

with it in the next couple of weeks. When she does finish, she'll move to the part of her training where the white wolf will teach her wisdom."

"I don't understand why she has to take training. She's a healthy girl."

"The magic we use is so demanding that it would kill her to light a candle with magic if she wasn't conditioned for it," he replied honestly. "When she's finished with her training, she'll be about five times stronger than any woman you've ever seen and able to run so long and so fast that a horse would die trying to keep up."

"I find that hard to believe."

"The horse will outrun her in the short term, Master Jallack, but it can't run that fast for long. Andra, on the other hand, can hold her slower pace for *hours*. Trust me when I say from experience that Andra will be able to run a horse to death when her training is complete."

"You say that as if you've done it," Darda said.

"I don't know if the horses died, but I once ran from Alamar to Atan in a little over ten days. That's nearly a thousand minars." He noted their blank looks. "Fifteen hundred kleters."

"That far?" Darda gasped.

He nodded. "I was in a hurry," he said dryly. "And the people chasing me were in even more of a hurry," he added, which made Darda chuckle.

They returned to their sturdy cottage and they invited him inside. Darda collected up nearly a sheaf of letters and handed them to Kyven, and he gave them Andra's letters in return. Darda looked very happy as she held those letters, her eyes obviously recognizing Andra's handwriting, and handed one of them to Jallack, who smiled as he read his and Darda's names on the front of the folded paper. "You said you could take us to see her?" Jallack asked.

"I can, but not right now," he replied. "She's in the middle of her training, and you coming would distract her. But I *will* take you to see her,

or bring her here to visit, when she finishes her Walk.”

“When will that be?”

“That depends entirely on how quickly she learns what the white wolf wants to teach her,” he replied. “But I think it’s fair to warn you that she’s going to seem different to you when you do see her. She left here a girl, Master, Mistress, but she’ll return a *woman*.”

“And is she being a good wife to you?” Jallack almost unwillingly asked.

Kyven laughed. “My buying her hand in marriage was for the sake of appearances, Master Jallack,” he replied. “That way her reputation in the village wasn’t harmed. Andra will be able to marry who she wants to marry.”

“But everyone thinks that you’re her husband.”

“When all this is over, they’ll never see me again,” he shrugged. “She can come home and claim to be a widow, and who can gainsay her?”

They both gave him a look, and Jallack chuckled ruefully. “That’s true,” he agreed.

He accepted Darda’s offer of tea, and spent a much less contentious morning than he expected with Andra’s parents. They asked him quite a few questions about being a Shaman, about the Arcans, and then finally about the rumors of war in Noraam that he’d first brought. The news that Avannar had been destroyed wouldn’t reach Eusica for weeks, until the merchants returned from Noraam, and that trip could take upwards of a month over the Angry Sea. But other rumors had reached them, the rumors of an Arcan army and the upheaval of the kingdoms. That was information that they already had, since Kyven had told them the first time he was here, but it was confirmation in a way because the rumors they were getting from traveling merchants was matching up with what Kyven had told them.

There were a few things he was curious about, however. “How fares the village and the region in general since we took the Lupans? Any other trouble?”

“None, thank the Father and the Son,” Darda answered. “You and your Arcan friend found all of them and took them away. There have been no sightings of the *loup garou* at all since your visit. All the villages in the Tallwood are almost rejoicing.”

“How fare those animals?” Jallack asked.

“They’re back in the wilds of Noraam and much happier,” he replied. “We have *much* larger animals over there, big enough for them to eat and not overhunt their territory.”

“Well, we did spread the word that Shaman from Noraam came and took the *loup garou* away,” Jallack told them. “We thought it only fair to give your people credit for that service.”

“Well, that was nice of you. Believe me, we Shaman will take any kind words we can get from humans,” he said with a drawl, which made the two of them chuckle a bit.

“Sometimes I wonder at you, Shaman. Again, you call humans *they* instead of *we*.”

“It’s a bit of a quirk for me,” he replied. “I belong to the Arcans, Master Jallack. I may be a human, but it’s the Arcans that need me, so I spend almost all my time among them. Most of them don’t believe I’m a human,” he laughed. “They think I just took a human form with magic to be able to sneak around in the human cities. Besides, right now, I’m no friend of the humans,” he said with a bit of a sigh. “I’m leading the Arcans in rebellion against their human masters, and it requires me to be... unmerciful,” he told them honestly.

“What do you mean?” Darda asked.

Kyven decided to tell them at least part of what was going on, how he was exploiting the fact that the armies of Noraam were locked in battle against each other to start an Arcan rebellion that would sweep across the land. “This is our best chance to free as many Arcans as possible in a short time with minimal risk,” he told them. “With their kings sending their armies out of their kingdoms, it’s given me the chance to move in. “Unfortunately, saving the Arcans means that I can’t be very merciful to the humans.”

“Why not?”

“To prevent mass exterminations of Arcan slaves before we can reach them,” he replied. “By completely destroying the plantations and towns and villages we attack, it gives the humans much more to worry about than warning others. Like, say finding something to eat,” he said honestly. “And we have to move fast, faster than any messengers *can* spread the word of what we’re doing. By staying ahead of the rumor and the messengers, it lets us take the humans by surprise. Eventually, though, the kings *will* recall their armies, and by then, I hope to have enough Arcans freed and with us to take those armies on head to head. Once we defeat those armies, it will allow the Arcan rebellion to sweep across the entirety of Noraam with almost no resistance.”

Jallack rubbed his stout chin, then nodded. “You have a good point. Besides, it’s the right of the animal people to rise up in arms against their slavers.”

“But what about the people? Won’t they suffer with their houses burned down and their food stolen?” Darda asked.

“It’s the only way to save the Arcans. Trust me, Mistress Darda, if I could find another way, I’d be doing it. I don’t want to do this, but Shaman do what must be done, even if we don’t like it,” he grunted.

“Well, there’s something *we* can do about it,” Darda said firmly. “The Noraavi people will need help once the Arcans are gone. Helping those in need is one of the fundamental tenets of our religion.”

“They’re all the way over in Noraam, Mistress Darda,” he chuckled.

“That’s what ships are for,” she said simply. “When the church leaders hear of what’s going on over there, they will send ships filled with supplies to help.”

“And missionaries,” Kyven noted lightly.

“The spreading of the true word is another of the tenets of our religion,” Darda smiled.

“Well, they can arrive in Parai at the southern tip of Flaur and move north from there, because we sacked Parai a couple of days ago,” Kyven told her. “Believe me, I’d take the Father and the Son over the Trinity any day. Your religion wasn’t corrupted by the Loremasters to ensure that the Arcans stayed enslaved.”

“That is what *your* people call it,” Jallack said. “We call it Catholicism, Kyven, and those who practice it Catholics.”

“Well, most people in Noraam think you worship the sun,” Kyven told him with a smile. “As in *that* sun,” he added, pointing up.

“Whyever for?”

“Because the Loremasters had to demonize your religion as well as the Arcans to maintain their power,” he replied bluntly. “They must have heard the Noravi translation of *father and son* and decided to play on those words to make people think you worshipped the *sun*, not the *son*. In Noravi, those two words sound almost identical. *Sun* and *son*,” he said, using the Noravi words.

“Ah,” Jallack said, then he nodded.

They held him up for a bit longer, then he finally extricated himself from them, because he had other things to do. He walked directly back to Haven and dropped off the letters with Rainsong, waking her up in the middle of the night to have her give them to Andra in the morning, then he walked back to Flaur and spent most of the rest of the night studying troop

dispositions and making sure that his planned routes were the most efficient ways to go.

It was while he was studying the outskirts of Orlann that his spirit padded out of the darkness silently, and she was carrying a new amulet and chain in her mouth. Kyven immediately knelt before her, feeling that same mixture of love and hate for his enigmatic spirit, and offered his hand to her. She dropped the amulet in his offered hand, then sat and wrapped her tail between her legs. Instead of touching him to pass along the intent of her mind, she deigned to “speak,” in a fashion, making her thoughts audible. *“It is finished,”* she declared. *“You will give Danna the amulet you currently wear, so she may safeguard what it holds. Do not wear both at the same time, it might cause unforeseen problems,”* she warned.

Kyven immediately reached up and pulled the amulet up over his head, set it on the ground, and set the new one in its place. It too was a foxhead medallion, but this one wasn’t made of metal. It was made of, of *something else*, some kind of material that seemed to swallow the light. It was almost weightless, and he thought that it might be a permanent object made out of *shadows*. He took off his boots and took hold of it, willing the change, and immediately his bones felt like they turned to water, and that cold sensation swept through him as he took on the form of a shadow fox Arcan. He stretched after it was done, looking down at his long black claws, and he felt oddly...comfortable in that non-human form. He’d been an Arcan for over a year, after all, and it had given him time to get used to it. He almost unconsciously shifted his balance a little to take the different legs and tail into account, leaning forward a little bit. “Well, it works,” he said, flexing his fingers. “How long can I stay like this?”

“For as long as you desire, my Shaman. The amulet doesn’t hold you in a magically induced form, it instead changes you back and forth completely between human and shadow fox Arcan. But it does have two restrictions,” she warned. *“Firstly, the amulet cannot change you back and forth at whim. The amulet must recharge for at least one hour after using it, so always keep in mind that you will be trapped in the form you assume for a minimum of one hour after changing. Secondly, the change is complete,*

my Shaman. If you lose that amulet, you will be trapped in whichever form you hold until you get it back. And while you are thus, you are an Arcan in all ways, even down to how magic might affect you. So, magic that only affects Arcans will affect you when you hold that form."

"That might actually be more of a benefit than a restriction," he said after a moment of thought, speaking perfectly from his maw, another practiced skill. "So me and Danna can be Arcans at the same time?"

His spirit gave him a bit of a sly look. "*Yes, though without you wearing the other amulet, she cannot take a human form at all,*" she replied. "*And already you consider using the amulet for your personal pleasure."*

"Hey, I remember what it was like with Umbra when we were both shadow foxes, it's *way* better," he replied shamelessly. "This way, I'll incite her to clench, and that makes it *so* worth it."

"That amulet is how you will fulfill your bargain with me concerning Nightfall, so don't lose it," she warned dryly.

"Even if I take it off, I can find it easily," he shrugged. "I think you made it out of solid shadows. I can *sense* it."

"In a way," she replied with a nod. "*The magic infusing the amulet makes it thus. It began as simple silver."*

"Ah. Interesting," he said, touching the amulet absently. "It feels different from the first one."

"The way it works is entirely different," she affirmed. "*And I had to place extra safeguards into it. The amulet can't be destroyed by a grounder or a Shaman's spell of dispelling. I put far too much effort into that device to have it ruined,*" she almost flared. "*I entwined its workings into the shadows to partially protect it from such devices. It won't function in a grounding field, but the grounders designed to destroy alchemical objects won't do so to the amulet. Also, my Shaman, no one can even touch it except a shadow fox. Only those who can directly interact with shadows can even*

touch it. To all others, it is insubstantial. Only Toby, Nightfall, Danna, and Umbra can touch that amulet outside of you and me."

"Now that's good to know, it means I can wear it all the time without fear of it being destroyed, and nobody can take it from me either." He touched his muzzle lightly, getting used to a form he hadn't held in weeks. "So, I'm stuck like this for the next hour, eh? Though *stuck* isn't exactly the right word. Sometimes I almost miss this form," he said, holding out his clawed fingers and wiggling them. "It certainly has its advantages."

"I can change you back whenever you like," she offered with amused eyes.

"Why, this is the best of both worlds," he said, dropping down onto all fours, feeling his legs fold in that peculiar way to allow him to take a horizontal base seamlessly. "I can be both a human *and* a shadow fox Arcan with this amulet." He glanced over at her. "I'm surprised you didn't make all of the amulets work like this one," he mused.

"It was much easier to do it the other way," she related. *"I don't think you understand how much effort I had to put into making that amulet you wear. It is far more powerful than the first two pairs of amulets. Believe me when I say, my Shaman, that I do not want to have to go through that more than once."*

Kyven chuckled. "So if I lose it, I'm screwed," he said lightly.

"Just slightly," she agreed dryly. *"Not only will you be trapped in the form you hold, but I will be very angry with you."*

He laughed. "Duly noted, sister," he replied lightly.

"I will leave you to play with your new toy, my Shaman. I find myself in need of rest after the effort I expended to make it," she told him with surprising candor.

"Alright, sister. I'll finish up my scouting, then I think I'll have breakfast with Andra. I think she'll be mad if I don't show up."

The shadow fox nodded, then the shadows swirled up around her seated form, and they took her with them when they evaporated.

Kyven stretched languidly, his tail going way up—it had ripped its way through his trousers when he changed form, he'd have to have Clover fix that when he got back—and he decided to revel a bit in the Arcan form. He bounded through the pine forests of southern Flaur on all fours, refreshing himself with moving in his Arcan body, brushing up on physical skills learned over the course of a year in which he'd been stuck in an Arcan form, including climbing all the way up to the top of one of the pine trees... and regretting it when he smelled pine sap all over his clawtips. He climbed back down and practiced drawing his pistols in his Arcan hands, having to thread his claw through the trigger guard in the act of grabbing the weapons, practicing for nearly two hours until he felt comfortable with the movement.

At sunrise, he shadow walked back to Vanguard, where the sun had yet to rise, and met Rainsong in the kitchen as she sleepily started preparing breakfast for herself and Andra. She smiled at him brightly when he walked in, since he was still in his Arcan body. "Kyven! I thought never to see you like that!" she blurted.

"My spirit made me a new amulet that allows me to change back and forth between a human and Arcan body," he said, touching the shadowy amulet around his neck. "I've spent the last few hours getting used to this again," he said, holding up his claws paws, padded palms up.

"Well, I think you look quite handsome!" she told him, patting him on the shoulder with a toothy smile.

"Clover's gonna love it," he said dryly. "Andra up yet?"

She nodded. "She found the letters you left and has been reading one of them before breakfast," she replied. "I'm honestly surprised to see you back."

“I told Andra I’d have breakfast with her, and I’m holding to it,” he replied. “I just wanted to put them someplace safe while I was doing some other errands, that’s all.”

He had a nice breakfast with Andra and Rainsong, enduring his human friend’s exuberance at getting all those letters, as well as a few hundred questions about his Arcan form. She seemed quite intrigued by the amulet, and was even more curious when she found out she couldn’t touch it. Her hand passed right through it like it didn’t exist when she tried to take hold of it to get a better look at it. “Amazing!” she blurted, then she laughed as she tried again. But her fingers slid right through it along the white fur on his chest. “It’s like it’s not even there!”

“Sister shadow fox made it that way so nobody can take it from me,” he replied, then endured Andra running her fingers through the white fur on his upper chest. “Only a shadow fox can touch the amulet. And that’s a bit forward, girl.”

She laughed and blushed a tiny bit. “I’m sorry. It’s just that your fur, it’s the softest thing I’ve ever felt in my life,” she said honestly, sliding her hand along his fur.

“It’s something of a standard among the breed,” Kyven said dryly. “The fur is partially wrapped up in how our shadow powers work. And you’re not the first person to tell me that,” he added lightly. He laughed when Rainsong boldly put her hand on his forearm, her eyes widening a bit as he slid her padded fingertips over his fur.

“Incredible,” she said. “It doesn’t look that soft or that thick.”

“Believe me, I almost lost this fur to a furrier when sister shadow fox first changed me into an Arcan. But, I think she would have intervened if the furrier had actually tried to kill me.”

“I wondered why she would do that to you.”

“To teach me wisdom,” he replied. “I had a very passive attitude about Arcans before I started my Walk, Andra. I didn’t really understand just what

they went through, until my spirit changed me into an Arcan and forced to live it first hand. I hated her for what she did to me, but now that I look back on it, I fully understand why she did it. Sometimes the lessons the spirits teach are not gentle, Andra,” he warned. “There might be times in your Walk that you think that brother white wolf is cruel or savage, but he’s not. He’s simply teaching you wisdom, and part of wisdom is to understand that the world *can be* cruel.”

Rainsong nodded sagely. “I found those lessons to be very unpleasant. I grew up in Haven, I had few wants or cares,” she explained. “The spirits had to show me the despair and pain that our people suffer through daily on a direct level to make me appreciate their courage and strength.”

“You’ll understand once you see it yourself, sister,” Kyven told her.

“Provided I survive long enough to reach that point.”

Kyven and Rainsong laughed. “I did, so I’m fairly sure you will too,” he said with a toothy grin at her.

After breakfast, he left Andra to put off her physical training to finish the letter she’d been reading, changed back to his human form, and shadow walked back to the army. Things were very busy as Arcans trained on one side of the field as the quartermasters prepared their stocks for transport on the other, breaking everything down so nobody carried more than they could easily manage, and getting everything organized so the supply masters knew who was carrying what, so they always knew what they had available and what they needed. Kyven tracked down Lightfoot to see what she was up to and saw that she was right in the middle of everything, stalking around with Lucky almost chasing her as she prepared to protect the non-combatants while they were on the move. Kyven caught up to her, almost having to run to keep up with her. “Lightfoot,” he called, which made her slow down and look over her shoulder.

“About time,” she said curtly.

“I had a busy night,” he told her dryly. “Are you going to be ready by this afternoon?”

She nodded. “By noon,” she promised.

“Good. Do me a favor and track down the other Shaman and the nannies and have them come to my tent. You too.”

She nodded. “Mate,” she said, pointing. Lucky clearly understood her intent, because he rushed off towards where a group of Arcans were practicing drills with their muskets.

It only took them about twenty minutes to round up all the Shaman and his nannies. Sunny sat demurely by the tent, remaining silent and trying to blend into the grass under her as Kyven knelt by the ashes of the firepit. “Alright, I got some scouting done last night,” he told them, motioning. An illusory map of the southern marches of Flaur appeared over the circle of stones. “We’re going to go more or less the way I first expected. We’ll leave here three hours before sunset, and that should get us to Canverra not long after sundown, when it’s dark enough for us to hit the place without them being able to see. There’s a militia of some two hundred civilians being led by army regulars here, who we’ll be attacking after we destroy Canverra,” he said, pointing to the forest north of us. “They know we’re in the pine forest, but they think we’re further north. They’re searching in a fairly thorough pattern through the forest, the lieutenant leading them actually has a brain,” he added with a respectful pitch in his voice. “He’s also taking this much more seriously than his civilian militia, and that means the army regulars interspersed through the men are staying alert. Last night he posted a very effective guard and scout pattern that’ll make it only slightly difficult to take his men by surprise. Fastpaw, I want you to keep scouts along this road,” he ordered, pointing. “There’s a chance that the militia might return to Canverra after we initiate the attack. I don’t want them sneaking up on us.”

“Easily done, Shaman,” the tall spotted cat nodded.

“After we take out the militia, we don’t have much to oppose us all the way to Orlann, the villages between Canverra and Orlann are all very small. I think the largest one only has about a hundred people in it. But there are a ton of small plantations scattered between Canverra and Orlann, so we’ll be covering a lot of ground zigzagging back and forth between them. We won’t see enough people gathered in one place to threaten the host, so hopefully we’ll be able to move pretty fast. We’ll be sacking plantations and small villages all the way up to Orlann, which should keep us busy for at least the next four days. Priority in Canverra and the plantations is food, waterskins and canteens, blankets and bedrolls, and weapons,” he told them. “Once every single Arcan in the host is carrying a musket, we can start just breaking them rather than collecting them, but we’re not there yet. When we reach the plantation country, we’re going to be breaking the vanguard into raiding parties to have them go out and destroy them. After they sack a few plantations to see how it’s done, we can let them handle it themselves. As long as they’re careful, they can easily attack a sleeping plantation and sack it with little threat to themselves.

“What about the detachment of army men they sent out from Orlann?” Stalker asked.

“It’s coming along this road,” he said, shifting the map and pointing. “It has a thousand regular army soldiers in it, so it poses some threat to the host. I’d prefer to just avoid them for now, until we have more Arcans, and maybe just avoid them altogether. When I think we have enough Arcans, we might deal with them, or we might possibly bypass them and put them so far behind us that they can’t hope to catch up, I haven’t quite decided yet. It’s going to depend on if I believe the army needs the practice attacking organized resistance. But as things stand now, they’re four days away minimum. The captain leading them isn’t hurrying,” he said with a dark chuckle. “They only marched eight minars yesterday. That’s a very lazy pace.”

“They’re on foot?” Clover asked.

Kyven nodded. "I got close enough to eavesdrop last night. The captain has this silly notion that we'll just collapse the instant we meet any form of organized resistance, so he's moving slowly so he can choose his ground to maximize his advantage. I'm inclined to just go past him and let those men run themselves half to death trying to catch up," he said with a dark smile. "So long as we kill or capture every horse in Orlann when we sack it, those men will be too far behind to ever hope to chase us down on foot and have no way to catch up to us."

"Wise," Ebony nodded in agreement.

"Alright, that's the plan. Anyone see any problems with it?" he asked.

"It seems very well thought out to me," Clover said, to which most of the others nodded.

"Alright. Stalker, you and me will be with the vanguard tonight. Clover and Dancer will stay with the host and rotate into the vanguard with the next change. Fastpaw, I'll make a paper map of this so you can organize your scouts and know which way to send them once we move away from Canverra. I have a detailed list of which plantations and villages we hit over the next three days, and in what order we do it. Lightfoot, you have your host scouts and defenders organized?" She nodded silently, which made him dismiss the illusion. "Alright then. We leave three hours before sunset, and I mean we *leave* at three hours before sunset. Have everyone ready to start marching at exactly that time. And remind all of them that we'll be on the move until around noon tomorrow, get what rest and practice we can, then start out again around sunset. When we leave this afternoon, nobody in this host is going to get more than three or four hours of sleep for a while," he warned. "We hold that pace until we *must* lay over for an extended rest, to get as far ahead of any organized resistance or potential rumor as possible. I've planned that first extended rest to be just north of Orlann, so we'll be moving fast until we sack the city. I figure after we destroy Orlann, we'll need time to organize the Arcans we free and the supplies we steal anyway," he shrugged.

“A good idea,” Dancer nodded.

“So, if you guys don’t mind, go ahead and get everything ready while I get some sleep, at least after I make Fastpaw that map. I don’t want Ebony to knock me out to make me rest,” he said, giving her a playful look.

“I’ll do it, Shaman,” she threatened.

They broke up, and after he made Fastpaw the promised map, he sat by the ashes of the firepit for a moment to collect his thoughts and relax a little before sleeping. Sunny sat right where she’d been, eyes down and remaining quiet, and the dispersion of the group around him caused the Lupans to pad over and lay down to each side of him. He absently scrubbed his fingers through Sirra’s wiry yet strangely soft fur as he went over the next couple of days in his mind. It was going to be exhausting and fast, as they raced ahead of the rumors that had spread from Canverra about them. Rumor was two days ahead of them at the moment—he’d been keeping track—and as fast as they moved, they’d overtake the knowledge of the Arcan rebellion by tomorrow, once they got past the village of Relotan. It meant that the first couple of days, the plantations and villages would be alert for trouble and thus harder to sack, but once they got out in front of the word of them, they’d find much less prepared humans.

Starting tonight, what happened in Parai and King’s Garden was going to spread northward up the Flauren peninsula, almost like a cancer. But it was a necessary evil, in this case, the cancer was killing a madman infected by the Touch and saving all those he might otherwise kill in his illness-induced blood frenzy.

But no matter how much he knew it had to be done, it didn’t mean he had to like it.

He yawned and ignored Ebony’s imperious look, nearly as much as he ignored the impact rod she started smacking into her palm ostentatiously. “I’m going to get some sleep, guys,” Kyven told his Lupan friends. “Sunny, stay with Ebony and listen to her. She knows how to break down my camp quickly, she’ll show you her system. Ebony, I’m sure you’ll be overjoyed to

hear that I don't want you to wake me up until you have to take the tent down."

"I wouldn't have anyway," she told him calmly.

"Good. And both of you get some sleep before we move out," he added as he stood up. He went to his modest, unassuming tent and crawled in, flopped down on his bedroll, and was asleep almost before he came to a full stop.

Chapter 4

It was complete chaos.

Kyven almost absently gunned down two men as he ran down the street of the small village of Cresano, his two pistols reporting sharply above the sounds of screaming and fire and musket fire. The little village had actually been ready for them, with its 31 men behind barricades and the women barred inside their houses. The tiny village consisted of a single street with houses and shops on either side, a very small village that depended almost completely on the eight plantations around it, catering to the overseers and plantation families as a common point for shopping and supplies. After destroying three of those eight plantations, somehow word had reached Cresano of the attacks, and they had fortified up. Hastily cobbled barricades were on each side of the single road through the village with armed men behind them by the time Kyven and the advance element he commanded reached the village.

It had to have been a talker, there was no way the villagers could have known they were coming any other way. It was getting more and more critical that Virren finish the device so Kyven could disable the talkers.

Breaking the defenses had taken Kyven all of four minutes. Their makeshift defenses were all pointed outward, so all he had to do was shadow walk onto the roof of the tallest building, in the middle of town, and pick off the men hiding on the southernmost rooftops and behind the south barricade with his rifle. After eight men were dead the rest of them finally realized what was going on, that was when the Arcans hit them, just as they scrambled for cover from the unseen sniper.

Once they had the south barricade breached, the village was doomed. Nearly four hundred Arcans flooded into the little one road village from the south, pulling the remaining men from their positions in the north and

picket positions between the houses to prevent Arcans from getting into town from the sides. Kyven had allowed the Arcans to rampage as he hunted down any talker he could find and took them from their owners, and now he was just helping them mop up the last of the defenders. He slid to a stop and pointed his pistols at two running women, but since they weren't armed, he turned his attention to the last man on a rooftop, who had been on the north side of town and had managed to get halfway down the village by jumping from roof to roof...quite a feat of agility. Kyven holstered one pistol and waited for him to pop out to shoot at someone, and when he did, he was blasted backwards by a jagged bolt of lightning that struck him almost dead center in the forehead. Pink and red gore fountained up into view as the man fell back, his head literally exploding from the flash-boiling of blood and ichor in his skull, and the thunderclap from the magical attack boomed and echoed off the walls, drowning out the screaming and the musket fire. He tracked his other pistol at a figure behind a house, visible to his spirit sight, a woman carrying a musket, and pulled the trigger the instant she came into view. She crumpled to the ground, the musket falling under her, and moved no more.

Those were the rules of this engagement. Ignore the women and children unless they were armed or carrying supplies, and if they were, kill them. And the body of the six year old girl laying on the ground in front of him, her neck torn open by an Arcan's claws, demonstrated that there were no gray areas in those rules. The little girl had been carrying a bundle of food, and so she was killed for it.

War was hell.

“Two in that building! One over there!” he barked to a group of Arcans coming up behind him, pointing. “Bring up the perimeter forces and reserves! Clear them out and sack the buildings!” he boomed, then he ran up to the burning building and channeled a withering blast of cold against the flames, snuffing them out and draining a great deal of his own energy. The buildings would be burned *after* they looted them. “Goldeyes! Goldeyes!” he shouted as several Arcans ran past him.

“Shaman!” his sergeant answered, the small, tawny cat running up on all fours and then taking a vertical base.

“What word from the raiding parties?”

“Six report back, two haven’t,” he answered, referring to the eight raiding parties that had been dispatched to attack the eight plantations around Cresano. “The two to the north.”

“About what I expected,” Kyven answered, holstering his other pistol as his spirit sight showed him that all the humans had been routed. The Arcans had hunted down the three remaining people, women cowering in their homes, and had forcibly evicted them with nothing but the clothes on their backs...and in the case of one, nothing at all, since she’d somehow lost her dress and shift in all the confusion. The woman had run naked into the night after the Arcans threw her out of the village between two buildings. “Let’s get these buildings emptied out!” he shouted, waving his arm. “Goldeyes, send two squads north to reinforce the two raiding parties that didn’t report in.”

“Aye, Shaman,” he nodded, then he rushed off to find the squad leaders.

And that was the way things had gone for some five days, since they began their march, though Cresano was the first village or plantation that had been ready for them for the last three days. They had marched up the peninsula like a wildfire, laying waste to every farm, village, and plantation they came across. They’d freed 307 Arcans from 17 plantations, quite a few small farms, and nine villages, but on the other side of that, he’d lost 71 Arcans in battle, in accidents, or who had decided to make their own way and left the host. The raids weren’t entirely without risk, even when they caught the plantations or villages completely by surprise. It had been roughest at first, when rumor had already reached their targets and they were expecting them, but since they’d outrun knowledge of them, they’d only lost nine Arcans total.

The strategy, though, was working. Since they'd outrun word of them, they'd been catching every farm, plantation, and village completely by surprise, sacking it, then moving on before the bewildered survivors could reach the next village or plantation. The survivors behind them were wandering around searching for a safe haven, but no matter where they went, all they found were destroyed farms, burned-out villages, and ruined plantations. They were finding that the Arcans were taking virtually all the food and weapons, leaving those behind them homeless, hungry, and increasingly desperate.

And the king knew it. Kyven's element had ambushed and destroyed five Flauren army patrols over the last two days, groups of twenty men on horseback, and Stalker's element had taken out three others. The army was hunting for them, and listening in on the talkers they took from the officers in charge of those patrols, the army couldn't quite understand what was going on. They thought it was some kind of coordinated mass rebellion of Arcans in multiple locations at once, they hadn't pieced together that it was a single rebellion that was just moving so fast it seemed they were everywhere at once.

But the first major obstacle was still in front of them. Orlann was only three days away, and what was more, the Flauren army detachment sent out to stop them was only a day away, in their direct path, at least for the moment. Kyven was going to move around that army, let them march past them and simply leave them behind. They didn't need their equipment, and it was too risky at this point to try to take them out. He had the numbers, but word had reached those men about the destruction to the south, and they were now taking their mission *much* more seriously. Kyven wasn't going to be able to blindside them now, and he'd take serious casualties trying to wipe out that force. Since they would pose no threat once they got around them, that was exactly what Kyven was going to do. The main host had already changed course to avoid those soldiers.

But those men would not save Orlann. They were now too far away to get back to the city before the Arcans attacked it. And that was what mattered most.

The Arcans gathered up the supplies and equipment to get ready to carry it out to where the main host would pass by as Kyven advanced up to where they were holding the 14 Arcans they'd recovered from the tiny village. The Arcans looked justifiably terrified, clinging to each other and sitting in a group in front of the largest building in the small village, the stables. The village was too small and off the beaten path to have an inn, and in many tiny Flauren villages like this, the stables usually had one or two small rooms holding a pallet for the very rare visitor. Kyven knelt in front of the huddled Arcans, who were looking around almost in shock, then reached up and pulled the collar from the closest one, a small ferret Arcan male. "Calmly, brothers and sisters," he said in a gentle, soothing voice, putting his hand on the shoulder of the ferret. "We're here to free you."

"Free us?" one of the Arcans asked, a small male mouse. Flaurens had a preference for using the smallest Arcans as house servants, both because they weren't as much use in the fields and because their small size made them seem less threatening.

"That's right, free you," he said, reaching over and pulling the collar off the mouse. "The Arcans you saw attack this village are just a small detachment from a much larger army of freed slaves, who are sweeping across Flaur to free the Arcans and punish the humans for their actions."

"And you're leading them? A human?" a small female cat asked.

"I'm a Shaman, young sister," Kyven said simply. "In this case, I'm very much against my own people. The humans have done great evil, and *this* human is here to punish them for that evil," he declared, pointing at himself. "But we don't have much time. I'm going to take your collars off, and we're going to lead you back to the main host. When you get there, we'll explain everything in greater detail, alright?" They all looked at him, then a few of them nodded. "Alright. What you can do for me, my brothers and sisters, is help us carry the supplies we took from the village back to the others. We're going to meet them about six minars from here. Is anyone not sure they're up to walking that far?" he asked. When no one answered, he nodded. "Goldeyes!" he boomed. His sergeant rushed up to them. "Assign a

squad to help our newly freed brothers and sisters get to the staging point. Make sure they eat and drink as much as they want before they move out, and make sure they don't carry too much. They've already had a trying day, let's not make it any worse for them," he said as he pulled off another collar.

"Yes, Shaman," he nodded, then bounded off to carry out the orders.

After pulling off all the collars, Kyven made himself useful by shadow walking into the advance, stepping out of the shadows beside a burning plantation house. It was one of the northern plantations whose attackers hadn't reported yet, and now Kyven could see why. Many of his Arcans were pinned behind a hedge as fifteen men with lots of muskets fired on them, young boys reloading the muskets as fast as the men were shooting them. The raiders had managed to get onto the plantation and set fire to the main house, but had run into resistance when they moved down to the Arcan shanties to free the workers. Those men were set up behind two overturned wagons just in front of the shanties. Kyven almost got himself brained by one of the Arcans when he knelt beside his sergeant leading the attack, a canine female called Longtail. "Don't *do* that, Shaman!" she complained, putting a hand to her tawny-furred upper chest.

"How'd they get into that position?" he asked, looking through a small hole in the hedge.

"They ran down to check the Arcans in the shanty town when we attacked rather than try to face us, we think they thought we came from their farm," she replied. "Then those boys ran down to them with all those muskets. We're not sure where they came from."

"Me either, I don't remember seeing that many muskets here when I scouted the plantation," Kyven grunted. "Well, we'll get them dug out in a minute. What about the Arcan slaves?"

"Holed up in their shacks behind. We're afraid to shoot at the men, we might kill our own."

“That’s probably why they set up where they are,” Kyven said professionally, drawing his pistols. “What about the rest of the plantation?”

“Dealt with,” she answered. “Most of the human females and girls ran into the forest past the house, and the men and boys are mostly right there,” she added, motioning at the two overturned wagons with her snout. “There are only ten men over there, but those boys are reloading the muskets faster than they can shoot them.”

The six still forms of Arcans laying between the hedge and the wagons was testament to how well those men were set up. They had the squad pinned behind the hedge, and with the shanties right behind the wagons, there was a real chance any return fire might kill the Arcans in those huts. Those walls weren’t thick enough to stop a musket ball. They actually had a pretty good position.

“Then let’s dig them out. Give me thirty seconds, then shift to the south while I keep them busy. You’ll know if I need help.”

“Yes, Shaman. Be careful,” she said, hunching down when a musket ball screamed through the hedge and right over her head.

Kyven created a disc of shadow under himself, then caused it to travel up his body, pulling him into the shadow world. He didn’t even bother hiding himself from the *things*, seeing the shadow world in its chaos when his non-shadow body twisted and deformed it. He barely moved, just shuffled forward a tiny bit on one knee, then returned to the normal world by dropping down from midair onto the roof of a hut...then nearly went right through the flimsy thing, his foot punching through the wooden shingles. He cursed and tried to pull his foot out, but found that putting any pressure on the roof might send him right through it and into the hut below. He created solid shadows that wrapped around his body, tendrils of solid darkness snaking down all the way to the ground just at the edge of the hut, to act as a brace to let him get out without falling through the roof. He had the shadows lift him up off the roof, supported by four shadowy tendrils, and he realized that his spontaneous idea had a *lot* of potential. He directed

those four shadowy tendrils almost like limbs, caused them to lift him up higher over the hut, and from that high vantage point, he had a perfect line of sight on the ten men and seven boys huddled behind the two wagons, the men right along the wagons as the boys behind them worked quickly to reload their muskets.

Kyven didn't wait long. Raising his pistols, he took careful aim not at the men shooting over and to the sides of the wagons, but at the boys reloading the muskets. Five of them dropped to the ground in a withering hail of pistol fire, as Kyven unloaded both clips in a frenzy of trigger pulling, then he caused his shadowy tendrils to swing him to the side with shocking speed when the men reacted, seeing him in the fire of the plantation house, screaming, and raising their muskets to fire at him. But the tendrils weren't real limbs, so they could move at the speed of Kyven's thought...and they nearly broke his neck when they yanked him nearly twenty rods to the side in a heartbeat. He hadn't expected it to be that forceful, so he hadn't braced himself for it. The movement was so fast that it confused the men, and that gave Kyven time to reload both pistols with practiced skill, barely taking five seconds to reload fresh clips into both weapons from his ammo belt. He then created an illusion of himself supported by those four shadowy ropes and had the illusion surge forward, lunging out of the darkness at the men, the pistols in the illusion's hands raising to fire as it charged at them from further to the right than they expected. The men reacted, shooting at the illusion while Kyven had the shadows pull him further to the right, almost in line with the wagons. He again opened fire, this time on the men while they were distracted by his illusion, and four men crumpled to the ground before Kyven stopped shooting. He pressed the advantage, having his shadows all but throw him forward as the men lunged for muskets on the ground that were loaded, and he slid across the grass not twenty rods from the men as he slashed his arm to the side in a savage motion, attacking directly with the shadows now that he was close enough to bring them to bear. A shadowy tendril lashed out from his arm and extended like a whip, waist-high to the men to catch the men ducking down to grab muskets, and the tendril hit them with enough force to smash them against the wagons. The men were stunned for that

critical moment that gave Kyven time to dash into position, then he raised a hand palm out and ended them with a withering blast of cold, freezing them instantly in the positions they held when the pale cone of magical light washed over them.

But the threat wasn't eliminated. He whirled on the three surviving boys, who had been laying on the ground, and drew a pistol in a quick motion, leveling it at them, one of which was in the act of trying to pick up one of the muskets on the ground. That boy froze when he saw the business end of Kyven's Colt, staring right down the barrel, his eyes widening. Kyven considered ending him and the other two, but in a moment of mercy, he decided against it. He didn't have to kill *every* man and boy in Flaur. Using the shadows, he pulled all the muskets away from the boys, then he holstered his pistol. "You have fifteen seconds," he told the three boys in a cool, calm voice. "If I can still see you when I count fifteen, you won't live to reach the trees. One."

The three boys flinched, then jumped up and ran for the closest treeline, which was away from the direction he'd sent his Arcan troops to outflank the defensive position. The sergeant bounded up to him and rose up onto her legs as the boys ran, looking past him and at them. "Should I send pursuit?"

"Just enough to make sure they don't slow down for a few minars," he replied easily. "But if they slow down or try to circle back, kill them."

She nodded, then pointed at two Arcans, barking out commands. The two Arcans grinned and bounded off after the boys. "That was masterful, Shaman," she said appreciatively. "I don't know what we'd do without you here."

"I'll take your praise if it saves Arcan lives, Longtail," he told her as he reloaded his pistols. Both only had one round left in the magazines. "Let's get these Arcans freed and salvage what we can from the plantation, and get it to the staging area."

"Yes, Shaman," she said with a smile.

Nearly four hours later, as the sun started to rise, it was a very tired Kyven Steelhammer that dropped a basket holding bread at the staging area. The main host would arrive in about three hours, but the scouts were already here doing their jobs, preparing the chosen site for the arrival of the main host. Raiders and scouts worked together to dig firepits and raise tents, the raiders getting the chance at a little extra rest before the main host arrived, which was how Kyven had planned it out when he devised this strategy. Among the advance element arriving to prepare the camp for the main host was Ebony, who was leading a very annoyed Vasha. Vasha stomped over to Kyven where he was sitting on a log and almost knocked him off of it, snorting in aggressive accusation as she pushed her nose against his chin, staring him eye to eye with a baleful look. “What, I don’t take you on the raids *once*, and you act like I’ve completely forgotten you?” he accused right back, pushing her nose away. “You *needed* some time at a slower pace to let that hoof heal!” he added, pointing at her left foreleg.

“It was just a bruise, Shaman,” Ebony told him as she reached him, Sunny right behind her. Both of them were carrying large packs, filled with his gear.

“Well, you don’t see Sirra and Dauro acting so jerky,” he said, swatting Vasha lightly on the snout. “Where are they, anyway?”

“They’re off hunting,” she replied as she and Sunny started taking off their packs. “How did the raids go?”

“We ran into actual resistance,” he replied. “We’re still trying to figure out how that happened.”

“Any problems?”

“We lost Arcans,” he said with a dark scowl. “I’m not happy about that. But we did manage to clear out the village and surrounding plantations, and we recovered 61 Arcans off the plantations and out of the village. Sunny, I want you to go help the others make those Arcans feel comfortable,” he ordered her. “Make sure they have everything they need

and answer any questions they may have. No doubt they're very afraid and unsettled right now, and they could use some reassuring."

"Yes, M-Shaman," she said, *almost saying master*. Kyven had been trying to break her of that over the last few days. She set her pack on the ground and hurried towards where the Arcans were sitting, pulling up her ill-fitting breeches. She still only wore those ragged breeches, her fluffy little bunny tail poking up from just under the waist and the piece of frayed rope she used as a belt.

"She working out?" he asked Ebony.

"She's getting there," she replied.

He was about to say something, but he sensed a shadow walker approaching, and then a gateway opened. Toby stepped out of it, rubbing at his wrist absently. He'd fully recovered from changing back permanently to a human several days ago, and looked as tall and sleek and dangerous as Kyven remembered. "Toby," he said.

"Ayah, Kyv," he replied. "Ah got news Danna wanted y'all tah get as fast as possible. DeVaur's making his move."

"It's about time," Kyven said darkly. "What's he up to?"

"He's sent some forty thousand men to Atan while the rest o' his army is set up to stop the northerners from followin'."

"He *is* splitting his forces," Kyven breathed. "Where are the Georvans in the plan?"

"Marching on Atan with his men," he replied.

"No doubt DeVaur's not too happy about that," Kyven chuckled. "But I doubt the Georvans would have agreed to hold off the northerners at Chardon while DeVaur marched his men into Atan and took over the mines."

“They’s more. The men DeVaur sent after the Alamari and Nurysians turned around,” he replied. “They’s ridin’ for Atan up the Green Valley as fast as they horses can get them there.”

“Are the Arcans at Brackenveld ready for the Alamari and Nurysians?”

“Ayah, they’s dug in and ready,” Toby nodded. “And the Arcans Carin’s sendin’ are bein’ rerouted into the mountains to avoid the village.”

“Danna’s on the ball,” Kyven said with an appreciative nod. “You getting used to not having fur?”

He laughed. “Ayah, it’s definitely feelin’ weird after all that time as an Arcan,” he replied, looking at his hand and flexing his fingers, which no longer had those wicked claws. “Ah’ve been wonderin’ what it was in our amulets she needed to make yours.”

“I’m sure neither of us would understand it if she told us,” Kyven said, which made him chuckle and nod. “But I do thank you. I’ve already found it handy to be able to change into an Arcan a few times. Mainly just to keep up with the army,” he said ruefully. “Vasha’s been more important to the host carrying supplies than carrying me, so I’ve been traveling on foot while she carries equipment. And not very happily,” he added when Vasha bumped him with her snout. “I know, girl, I promise you’ll go out with me when it’s our turn to be in the raiding parties,” he told her. “So will Sirra and Dauro.”

“And you’ll take one of us,” Ebony added firmly.

“You three have more important things to do than babysit me,” he told her. “If you want to help me, Ebony, you keep doing what I told you to do. Trust me, I can take care of myself out there.”

She gave him an unfriendly look, but said nothing.

“But when the time comes to hit Orlann, you three *will* be with me,” he added, which made her give him a much less hostile look.

“How’s that workin’ out? The raiding parties?”

“Very well,” he replied. “Now that we’re in front of the rumor about us, we’ve *mostly* been hitting plantations and villages that have no idea we’re coming. The king still hasn’t spread a warning about us, trying to avoid causing a panic and relying on the army detachment he sent out to deal with us. He’s willing to lose a few villages if it means the entire kingdom doesn’t go into a panic. But that’ll change when we hit Orlann. That reminds me, do you know how close Virren is to being finished?”

“That’s the other thing Ah came down here tah tell you, Kyv. Virren said he’ll be finished with yo’ device late today, or tomorrow mornin’ at the latest,” he declared. “He wanted tah make sure yo’ ready for it.”

“I’ve got that all planned out,” he nodded. “It was designed to be mobile, so we’ll break it down and have the Arcans carry the pieces, then just put it together when it’s needed.”

“How big are the pieces?”

“Not big, each one can be carried by an Arcan without weighing him down,” he replied. “But it’s the only thing he’s going to be carrying. And the Arcans carrying it will be in the middle of the host and very well defended,” he added. “That device is *critical* to our success. And I’m going to be using it as soon as I get it down here,” he added. “I have to disable the Flauren talkers as quickly as possible, so they can’t coordinate. If I can disable the talkers *before* the king decides to warn all of Flaur about us, it will make our job *much* easier. Nobody will know we’re coming.”

“Ayah, Ah can see that,” Toby nodded. “Ah better get back, Kyv, Danna has me watchin’ the armies at Chardon, and Nightfall’s watchin’ Brackeveld at the moment, so’s Danna knows when the armies move against it.”

“Alright. I’ll be up tonight in Atan to get the device, and I’m going to need all three of you to help me get it back here. It’s going to work out, I’ll be with the main host for the next two days while Clover and Dancer lead the raiding parties.”

Toby nodded. “Ayah, shouldn’t be all that hard,” he replied. “We can just carry one piece at a time ‘til we get them all over here. How many pieces is they?”

“Eight. No, ten, I forgot about the baseplates,” he answered.

“Then that be easy,” Toby said dismissively. “Ah’ll see y’all tonight, Kyv. Good luck.”

“Come tell me if anything big happens,” he said as Toby created a disc of shadow at his feet.

“Ah will,” he promised as the disc traveled up Toby’s body, and once it went over his head, it winked out of existence.

“That sounds like good news, if the device is almost done,” Ebony said.

“It is, it’s *very* good news,” he replied with a nod. “But it does mean that I’m going to have to put a hand in. I’ll have to go out just after noon, Ebony, and I probably won’t be back until late tonight or possibly tomorrow. I have to get the Flauren commanders to pull DeVaur back to Flauren *now*, before I destroy the talkers and they can’t recall DeVaur easily. Danna needs me to take some pressure off her.”

“How are you going to do that?”

“Simple, my dear Ebony, I’ve heard the voice of the Grand Marshall of the Flauren Army, and I know where he keeps the talker he uses to talk to DeVaur. I’ll be issuing those commands to DeVaur myself, so I’m going to be absolutely positive that they’re exactly what I want him to hear. And if that’s not enough, tonight we’re going to attack Palvio and its surrounding plantations. Well, one of them just *happens* to be DeVaur’s personal family plantation, where his wife and kids are. So in addition to having orders to return, he’s going to have very personal motivation to come after me,” he said with a dark smile.

Ebony gave him a look, then gave a humorless laugh. “That’s rather underhanded, Shaman.”

“It’s my niche,” he said with a slight smile. “Now, since this is the only chance I’m going to get for any sleep at all for the next couple of days, I’m taking it. So if you don’t mind, help me set up my tent so I can sleep until sunrise, and don’t let anyone wake me up.”

“You never have to force me to let you get sleep, Shaman,” she told him with a smile.

The office of the Grand Marshall of the Flauren Army was as grand as the title suggested. It was a large, nearly cavernous office filled with elegant, antique furniture, many alchemical devices that made it luxurious, and loaded with gold and silver. There was a fortune in that room to a Eusican, who valued those metals as a currency, where gold and silver were used in Noraam mainly for highly decorative items made for the rich. Gold or silver cutlery used with Eusican china was a mark of a rich and successful person in many kingdoms of Noraam. There were silver ewers on trays, liquor glasses made of leaded crystal with gold bases and rims, gold silverware in a case on a side table with expensive Eusican china stacked on the lower shelves beneath it, and several golden statuettes on stands along the walls. Very expensive Jenn rugs were on the floor, and a cool breeze blew across the large room supplied by alchemical air chillers, the one alchemical device most every Flauren worked very hard to afford, due to the very hot climate on the peninsula. Even the smallest, least expensive air chiller could turn a house from an unbearable sweat box into a comfortable abode in the hottest summer months.

Kyven Steelhammer sat behind a gold-inlaid desk at the far end of the room in his Arcan form, his tailed butt in a deeply cushioned rotating chair and his bare, clawed feet resting on the antique desk absently as he listened to a Flauren officer on the other end of the talker in his hand. He looked very out of place in that highly elegant office, as did the bodies of five men

laying in various places on the floor, ruining the expensive Jenn carpets upon which they lay with pools of blood. The men on the other side of those extravagant double doors on the far end of the office had no idea that Kyven had entered the office of their commander, killed him and his office flunkies, and now had possession of the talkers that the Grand Marshall used to issue orders to his Field Marshalls. He took a sip of the bourbon in the glass on the desk as he waited for them to get DeVaur, setting it back down and actively avoiding the long spatter of blood strewn across that expensive desk.

“This is Field Marshall DeVaur,” DeVaur’s familiar voice came over the talker. “What is the password of the day?”

Kyven spoke in the voice of the Grand Marshall’s main aide. “Palda’s Corset.”

“Correct. Where is the Grand Marshall Torrez?”

“One moment for the Grand Marshall.” Kyven hesitated a brief moment to switch his feet on the desk, then answered, speaking in the voice of the man he’d just killed. “Antonio,” a gravelly, burned-out voice answered, sounding as if it had been all but destroyed by a lifetime of shouting orders and smoking expensive cigars. “I have new orders for you, and you’re not going to like them.”

“How so, sir?”

“I’ve been ordered to have you pull out of the Free Territories and return to Flaur as fast as you can possibly march the men,” he replied. “And I want you to find every horse you can get your hands on and put your infantry on them, and I want you to send them and your cavalry units ahead. You come with the cavalry, leave your best colonel in charge of the infantry you can’t get on horses.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

“It’s that fucking Shaman you described in your reports. He’s down *here*. He’s freed thousands of Arcans off plantations and he’s marching

them up the peninsula as an army.”

“With all due respect, sir, the garrisons we have in place should easily be able to handle a mob of Arcans.”

“I thought that too, until he wiped them out,” Kyven said in a short voice. “I have no idea how, but the Shaman’s Arcans are all armed, and they’re fighting like they know what they’re doing. You said that this Shaman has the ability to move people vast distances very quickly with magic, well, we think he’s brought a part of that army you’re facing in the north down *here*, and so far, our men haven’t even slowed them down. The Shaman and his Arcans have wiped out every town and village and sacked every plantation from Parai to Cresano, they destroyed King’s Garden, and he ambushed and wiped out over half of the Orlann garrison when they marched out to put down what we thought was an Arcan rebellion. Now there’s nothing between him and Orlann but undefended villages, and Orlann itself no longer has a big enough garrison to protect it, even with the men of town forming a militia.” He took a deep breath. “We’re going to lose Orlann, Antonio. We don’t have the forces in position to protect it. And I hate to tell you this, but the Shaman and his Arcans were last reported just south of Palvio.”

“What? Palvio?”

“And there’s nothing I can do about it, Antonio. I don’t have any men *left* south of Orlann. There’s nothing to stop him from destroying the village and all the surrounding plantations, including yours. I know you have a personal family talker, so I suggest you use it. Warn Cresselda and have her evacuate with the boys. Don’t worry too much about what the Arcans may destroy, we can rebuild it with army resources. With luck, they can warn everyone else in Palvio and they can escape to the north. Have them go north and *keep going*, Antonio, all the way to Tallasar. We’re going to form up as many men as we can muster at Tallasar, and when we have enough, we’ll move south to face the Shaman and his Arcans. Your family will be safest in Tallasar.”

“That’s a terrible plan, sir, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“I agree, but it’s the *king’s* plan,” Kyven said darkly. “He’s issued direct orders, and I can’t countermand them. He cares more about Tallasar than the dozens of towns and villages between Tallasar and Orlann. And I hate to say this, Antonio, but I partially agree with him, at least about the cavalry. My aides have done the math, and if he frees even half of the Arcans between here and Orlann, he’ll have a big enough army to threaten the city. He’ll lose most of it trying to take Tallasar, but there *is* a risk. Personally, I’d be happy just having you send your cavalry back here, that should be more than enough to reinforce Tallasar and destroy this Shaman and his Arcans, but the king wants every able-bodied man he can muster. So, I hate to say it, but you have your orders. Get your cavalry on the way back to Flaur as fast as possible, and add in every man you can find a horse for him to ride. I want you with the cavalry. You’ve faced this Shaman before, you know him, so you’re best suited for dealing with him.”

“Sir, I am just two days from routing the Arcans and taking Atan, whose mines we *need*,” DeVaur protested.

“Can you take the village without your cavalry?”

DeVaur was silent a moment. “Possibly. If I move some men around.”

“Alright. I’ll tell the king that your army is actively engaged in combat and can’t withdraw because of the danger of it. You start organizing your cavalry to return to Flaur, and go ahead and take Atan with your infantry. Once you have Atan, garrison it to hold it and return to Flaur as quickly as possible. You have three days, Antonio. I can’t stall any longer than that before the king himself issues the recall. You know how impatient he can be.”

“I’ll have Atan under our flag in three days,” DeVaur promised confidently.

“Very good. In the meantime, I’m going to try to convince the king to change his plans. We can’t just give up a third of Flaur because the king

doesn't want his palace threatened. After the Arcans destroyed King's Garden, first he was furious, but when they wiped out the Orlann garrison sent against them, he suddenly changed direction and ordered everything to Tallasar to protect it. I just don't get it."

"Between you and me, sir, it's the coward's reaction," DeVaur said with a sniff.

"I could have you executed for a remark like that, Antonio...and maybe I would if I didn't at least partially agree with it," Kyven said, grunting in a way that the dead man laying near the desk did often. "Hopefully I can talk some sense into him. But just in case I can't, make preparations to get the infantry back to Flaur."

"I will. If you'll excuse me, I want to contact my wife and tell her to leave the plantation."

"I won't hold you back. Contact me this time tomorrow with your progress."

"I will, sir."

Kyven put the talker in his satchel, just as another inside it started to beep. He ignored it as he took the bourbon and tossed it on the desk, then channeled a single lick of flame onto it, causing it to burst into fire. That fire quickly took hold on the antique wooden desk, but just to be sure, Kyven channeled fire into the expensive Jenn rugs. By the time the aides outside realized the office was on fire, there would be little they could do to save anything within. He shadow walked, quickly changing his location, and sat on his haunches as he took the beeping talker out of his satchel and turned it on. "Cresselda! Cresselda, darling, what took you so long to answer?" DeVaur's voice came over it.

Kyven put a hand down on the top of the roof of the very large, very expensive plantation house as he looked down at Cresselda DeVaur, pointing at one of the fields and talking to a small cat Arcan. "Well, at the

moment she's busy dressing down one of your house Arcans, DeVaur," Kyven said in his own voice, mellowly and conversationally.

"*You!*" DeVaur nearly spat. "How did you get this talker?"

"I took it out of your wife's dressing table," he replied smoothly. "She thinks the house servant moved it. She couldn't find it this morning. She usually carries it around with her."

There was a long, ominous silence. "If you lay a *finger* on her, Steelhammer, you will suffer like no man has ever suffered before. The Trinity will even pity *you* for the torment you endure before you die," he said in a hissing voice.

"I have no intention of killing your wife, DeVaur," he replied lightly. "She's no good to me dead, after all. Why would I kill such a valuable bargaining chip?"

"What are you about, Shaman?"

"It's simple, DeVaur. I'm going to capture your wife and the two sons you have on the plantation," he replied. "And as long as you behave, they'll be perfectly fine. But every time you don't do what I tell you to do, I drop a severed head on your planning table," he said in a voice that was chilling both in its tone and its relaxed nature. "So, you can be naughty twice before you lose everything you care about. The exchanging of hostages is a time honored Flauren tradition, DeVaur, you should be quite familiar with it."

"You son of a bitch!" DeVaur snapped.

"Oh, and speaking of your first order, here it is. I want you to attack the Baltons and Mallans tomorrow at sunrise. I want to see one of those epic clashes in the pastures and fields north of Chardon, DeVaur, you know, thousands of men milling around like ants, cannons and alchemical siege weapons booming, bodies all over the places, fires burning in the trees, you know, all-out war in all its ghoulish glory. I want to be entertained."

"You are a fucking bastard!"

“I’m no more sadistic than the bastards I’ve been killing on Flauren plantations that make their Arcan slaves fight to the death with rusty pitchforks just because they’re bored, DeVaur,” he said in a much more serious, grim voice. “I’ve actually been *enjoying* killing your countrymen down here in Flaur. I had no idea the common Flauren was such a fucking sadist. I think I’m doing the world a service shattering your entire nation one village and plantation at a time.”

There was nothing but silence from the talker.

“You didn’t know I was down here, did you? Not long ago, I realized that with the Flauren army in the Territories, why, there’s nobody left down here that can prevent me from freeing the Arcans and having them raze your entire country to the ground. So, I decided to retire as a spy and take up a new position as the leader of the Flauren Arcan rebellion,” he said in a husky purr. “Your army is so far from Flaur that there is no possible way you can get back down here in time to save it. I’m going to sweep across Flaur like a firestorm, wiping out the disease that is your society. All of it. I’ve wiped out every village, town, and plantation between Parai and Cresano, from east to west, DeVaur. I’ve exterminated every male I can find, even the young boys and infants, and left the women and girls with no home, no food, and no hope. I’m going to march right up the peninsula and destroy *every* Flauren town and city. I will wipe out your men and boys, burn down anything with a roof, leave your women and little girls homeless and starving, and destroy everything that you have ever known that is Flaur. There will be *nothing left* when I march into Alamar, Georvan, and Carin, and I’ll do the same thing to them I’m doing to Flaur. I’m getting rid of the societies on Noraam that depend the most on Arcan slavery, and as a result will be the ones that will never accept change. Flaur will be wiped off the face of Noraam, DeVaur, and there’s *nothing you can do about it*. You’re too far away, pinned down by the rest of my puppets and unable to disengage. By the time you get back down here, you’ll find nothing but dead bodies, starving women, and burned-down cities no matter where you go.

“That’s what’s in store for Flaur, but *you*, DeVaur, you can save you wife and your boys. I’ll give them back to you alive and whole, and I’ll even let you and what men in your army survive the meat grinder I’ve put you in live so you can rebuild as the last Flauren men left alive. All those women wandering around starving and hopeless, just think of the harem you could build, DeVaur,” he said with mocking playfulness. “Why, you’ll be the new king of Flaur...at least the village you build in what was once Flaur once you finally get home.”

When more silence greeted him, Kyven laughed. “How does it feel to be helpless, DeVaur? To have no control over your own life, your own fate, and be ruled over by the cruel whim of someone who has no compassion in his heart for you, your family, or your entire race? *That* is what it’s like to be an Arcan, DeVaur. I’m showing you what you and your people have done to *them* for over a thousand years. And it’s not a good feeling, is it? I delight in the irony of it,” he said with dark humor. “In the end, DeVaur, you will know and appreciate the full scope of the horror the humans have perpetrated against the Arcans for centuries. By the time you get down here, I’ll be long gone and Flaur will be nothing but a smoking ruin filled with starving women and girls. You are no longer the master of your own fate, and your people are now in the hands of those who have no mercy or compassion for you. You’re being hoisted by your own petard, DeVaur. How does it feel?”

“You are *insane*,” DeVaur said. “You are a *human*, Steelhammer! You’re destroying your own people!”

“I belong to the Arcans, DeVaur,” Kyven told him. “They are the people I am protecting. And if it means that I have to destroy my *own* people to save them, then so be it. That’s a burden I’ve already accepted. You will remember me as the worst villain to have ever lived in the history of the world, but I can live with that if it means that in the end, that the Arcans are free,” he said with simple dignity. “Now, you have a battle to plan, DeVaur. I want to see you taking it to the Baltans and Mallans at sunrise tomorrow. In the meantime, I think I’m going to go ahead and capture your wife and sons *now*, so there’s no chance that they accidentally

get killed in the confusion when my Arcans sack your plantation. I don't want them harmed, and as long as you do what I tell you to do, that's exactly how they're going to stay."

"You *are* mad. Completely mad," DeVaur said in a hushed voice.

"I may be mad, but that doesn't mean that I'm stupid," Kyven said lightly. "And since you think I'm mad, I'm sure you can believe that I'm fully capable of what I have planned for Flaur. After all, I've already started it. It's almost a shame that you won't be here to see Tallasar burn, DeVaur, to see the Barrista in flames and the royal palace going up like kindling, just like the plantation house in King's Garden did," he said with an ominous, soft chuckle. "Anyway, we both have things to do, so let's not dawdle. Get that battle plan drawn up, Field Marshall. I'm sure that it'll be tactically brilliant, and you'll blow the hell out of the Baltons and Mallans. While you're doing that, I have your family to capture, a village and its surrounding plantations to sack, men and boys to murder, and women and girls to thrust into abject hopelessness and despair. It's not much fun, but it does keep me occupied," he said casually. He then turned off the talker.

He put both hands on the top of the roof after putting the talker away. After DeVaur gets over his shock, Kyven surmised, he'd do what Kyven wanted him to do, split his army. He would follow his orders, he would abandon the cavalry attack on Atan and send every man he could get on a horse south, to get them to Flaur as fast as possible. He might warn the Georvans about Kyven's intent, might even go so far as to call for a truce to tell the northern generals what Kyven was doing in Flaur, try to manufacture a cease-fire to allow him to disengage his army to send it south. No matter how much he wanted to kill Danvers and destroy the Arcans of Haven, he knew and *believed* that Kyven was both in a strategic position to destroy Flaur and had the ruthlessness to actually *do it*.

DeVaur was many things, but he was not stupid.

Kyven's order to attack the Baltons and Mallans was the wild card. There were three ways that DeVaur would react, and Kyven was honestly

unsure as to what he would do. He had a good idea of the man's personality, but he wasn't sure how he was going to react to his family being put into the mix.. He could obey Kyven and attack the Baltons and Mallans, he could decide that his family was lost to him and ignore Kyven's threat, pull his entire army and return to Flaur at forced march speed, or he could attack Atan in a fit of revenge against Kyven for killing his family and outmaneuvering him. Those were his choices, and the one he thought DeVaur would most likely take would be to pull his forces and rush back to Flaur to save it...which was exactly what Kyven wanted him to do. DeVaur's glory would mean nothing if he proved he was great general in the Territories while Kyven eradicated his entire kingdom, right under his nose. Besides, the temptation to take full control of Flaur would lurk in the back of his mind, making him willing to throw away his family in order to gain that kind of power. Like any general, noble, or high-ranking politician, the allure of even more power would drive him.

One thing was for sure, DeVaur wasn't thinking about Atan and the mines anymore.

There was a reason behind it all, and that was to split DeVaur's army so Kyven didn't have to face their entire might at once. By sending his cavalry ahead to try to save Tallasar, it would give Kyven the chance to destroy his very large, very well-trained, and very capable army one piece at a time instead of having the entire thing rammed down his throat. That was not a situation Kyven felt his Arcans could handle. And DeVaur's recall of his cavalry bought Danna more time, time to get in supplies and weapons from Haven, time to dig in that much more, time to prepare her army for the battle to come.

Someone was going to do it. He had DeVaur in a position where he would have to pull out just to save Flaur—or what was left of it—and when he retired from the field, the Georvans, Baltons and Mallans, or the more northern kingdoms would march on Atan, taking advantage of DeVaur's sudden withdrawal. The key of it for Kyven was to buy Danna as much time as possible to get in as many muskets and rifles as possible before her Arcans were tested by the humans. Every day Kyven maneuvered the

humans into not attacking was more Arcan lives saved because they had guns to use in battle.

Watching DeVaur's wife, who was actually quite lovely, the kind of woman that got only more handsome as she aged, he decided to let her enjoy her blissful ignorance a little while longer. He'd capture DeVaur's two sons first, one a young teen and the other about eight, then he'd capture Cresella DeVaur and dump them with Rainsong in Vanguard. Starting tonight, she'd be shivering in the cold of Haven and wondering if she'd ever be warm again.

He wasn't going to kill DeVaur's wife and children no matter what DeVaur did, but DeVaur didn't necessarily need to know that. He had plans for them, and they weren't plans that the DeVaur family were going to like.

Not one bit.

It was nearly sunset when Kyven stepped out of the shadows in front of Virren's alchemy shop in the all but abandoned village of Atan. There were only a handful of humans left, Virren, Timble, some of their apprentices, and since the Arcans avoided the village so they didn't damage it, it left the streets all but deserted. Stepping out behind him was Nightfall, brushing her waist-length black hair back over her shoulder absently. She had come to get him to tell him that Virren was done, and had decided to tag along when he came to retrieve the device. It was important enough that he'd ordered the main host not to move until he gave the order, having them hold in their encampment. The raiding units *were* on the move, however, but they'd be bringing what they recovered from Palvio and its surrounding plantations back to the host rather than place it where the host was going to stop. That meant that some of the porters that usually stayed with the host were going out to recover the pilfered supplies to carry it back, to free up the fighters to continue their press.

Two Arcans opened the door for him when he approached it, giving him honest smiles. "Shaman, it's good to see you again," one of the canine

guards Danna had assigned to the shop said.

“It’s good to be back. I was told Virren has something for me.”

“He’s waiting for you back in his workshop,” he said in reply, motioning with his hand.

The burly alchemist was overseeing the removal of molten metal from the forge when Kyven walked in. He smiled and came over and gave him a firm handshake and a smile. “Kyven, lad, good to see you,” he said. “I just finished your device about two hours ago.”

“That’s very good news, Virren. Me and Nightfall here are going to take it to Flaur, one piece at a time. Danna and Toby are too busy to help right now.”

“I heard that the Alamari and Nurysians attacked Brackenveld earlier today,” Virren said.

Kyven nodded. “That’s where we came from. I was over there making things more challenging for the humans. When I left, they were in complete disarray and were in full retreat.”

Virren smiled. “Why am I not surprised?”

“I didn’t have anything to do with it, they weren’t expecting the Arcans to have fortifications and artillery, including one of the death machines I took from Avannar,” he replied simply. “The Alamari barely scouted the village and just rode their cavalry in, expecting to rout the defenders. The Nurysians tried to stop them, but you can’t put a leash on stupid, you have to just let stupid burn its hands in the fire. The Alamari rode face first right into the death machine. Things went downhill for them from there.”

Virren laughed brightly. “So the Arcans hold fast in Brackenveld?”

“The humans intend to attack again in the morning, *much* more carefully this time,” Kyven said dryly. “Now, let’s have a look at the device.”

Virren led him into a storeroom, where the device was assembled and waiting. It was built to resemble an archway, made of three different kinds of metal, the metals in layers of which that made it look vaguely like a metallic rainbow. The arch reached about nine rods high at its highest point, well over Kyven's head, but the two legs of the arch were only about five rods apart, allowing most any adult standing within it to put a hand on each side of the arch without having to stretch. There was a baseplate under each leg of the arch that actually had nothing to do with the device, just there to steady it. An empty socket was at the very top of the arch, for the crystal, the socket nearly the size of a honey melon. "Here it is, Kyv. I think it's the most challenging alchemy I've ever done," Virren said, a bit of pride in his voice.

"It looks rather, simple," Nightfall mused.

"That's only what you can see on the outside. Fusing those three metals perfectly along the entire length of the arch was *extremely* challenging," Virren said. "And we're not even talking about the alloy mixture shifts along the arch. The alloy percentages at the base of the arch are different from the top for each metal, and those mixture changes had to be *smooth and gradual* along the length of each leg of the arch. Trust me, Nightfall, this is one of the most intricate and complicated alchemical devices I've ever built. That's why it took me so long."

Kyven put a hand on it, and felt the *purity* of it. "You outdid yourself, Virren," Kyven said, feeling the receptive nature of the device under his fingers. This device was built to be alchemical, but as of yet, it had no purpose stamped upon it. Since Virren didn't know what it did, he didn't imprint his reality into the device that defined the device's function, the only reality he imprinted into the device that the device was *alchemy*, and thus was capable of channeling magic. It would be up to Kyven as its user to decide what this device could and could not do...and Kyven was not a man who was bound to the same concept of reality as other men. Any other man who used this device would be limited to what Virren decided it could do. But Kyven could make this device do nearly *anything*, as long as he had the power and the will to make it happen. "I can feel it. The device is *perfect*."

“Well, that makes a craftsman happy to hear,” Virren said, puffing his chest out maybe a little bit. “It breaks down exactly as outlined in the plans you gave me, lad. Two men can easily disassemble it.”

“I see no borders or junctions,” Nightfall said.

“That’s because when it’s assembled, there aren’t any, magic fuses the pieces into a singular whole,” Kyven said, channeling magic into the device. With a series of *clangs*, the ten pieces of the device un-fused and separated, but the pieces didn’t fall to the floor. They were socketed, each one fitting into the one below, with the arch piece setting into the top. “But a Shaman who knows how it works can break the device down into its pieces for carrying.” Kyven spun out a tendril of solid shadow, wrapped it around the top of the arch, and carefully lifted it out of the sockets of the two legs. It was the largest and heaviest of all the pieces, some five rods across and probably weighed about thirty stones, but its round construction would make it not that difficult to carry. Only Vasha or a very large and burly Arcan was going to be carrying the arch piece of the device. The other pieces were about three rods long each, and the two baseplates weren’t heavy as much as they were bulky. Out of the device, the arch almost looked like a semicircle of metal rather than a piece of an alchemical device. “I guess I owe you for the crystal you socketed into it to test it, Virren.”

“A Shaman made it, Kyv, so you don’t owe me anything,” he smiled. “But it consumed the crystal to fuse the device.”

“Which is how it’s supposed to work,” Kyven nodded. “When I use this device to destroy every mana crystal within two hundred minars of it, that fact will make it impossible for anyone who steals the device to even put it together, let alone use it.”

“That’s what it does?” Virren asked curiously.

“It’s safe to tell you now, Virren. This device doesn’t actually do *anything*,” Kyven told him with a smile. “What it *will* do is provide an external focus and a boost for my own power.”

“So it’s an amplifier.”

“Of a sort,” he nodded. “Using this device, I can impose my will into reality with much more power and focus than I can unaided. But, the first time I use it, then it *will* do something, Virren. My reality will imprint into the device and give it a purpose, and that purpose will give this device the ability to amplify my own abilities, and also the ability to alter reality itself in case I’m not the one using it. That way if I die, one of the others can use the device in my stead. They won’t be able to use it with even a fraction of the same ability as me, but it might be just what they need to get the army through an otherwise hopeless situation.”

“Alter reality? What does that mean?” he asked as Nightfall’s eyes widened, and she nodded emphatically.

“Just what I said, friend,” he replied. “Illusion isn’t just making people see things that aren’t real. It’s about reaching into the very nature of reality itself and changing it in small ways that benefit me. After I use this device, it will imprint with my own ability, and that will give it the power to reach into reality and make a change. A single change, a small change, but that single small change might be the deciding factor in a battle.”

“Like how?”

“Like changing reality so gunpowder doesn’t burn,” he said, using the same example as before. “No gunpowder, no guns. No guns, and whoever is better suited to fighting without them is going to win the battle. Or, I can use it to decide that every mana crystal in the device’s range is depleted. Then boom, every mana crystal within the device’s range shatters. No mana crystals, no alchemical devices, and no replacement crystals to replace the ones that depleted. The mana crystal in the device is for powering the effect long after I run out of strength, to hold a change for a while, or it can augment my own ability to increase the effect to cover a larger area if I use up all that energy at once. Most of what I do can only be temporary, reality reverts back to normal after I stop, but if that temporary change has an effect, say, like altering reality temporarily that makes all mana crystals

shatter, those mana crystals will be destroyed even after I stop altering reality. The first thing I'm going to do with it is destroy every talker in the entire kingdom of Flaur, because I know how talkers work and I can ruin *all* of them permanently with a single temporary change to reality. And since it's actually a very small change, I can put a lot of power into it to make the effect cover the entirety of Flaur, even have the effect reach into the southernmost stretches of Georvan. Without talkers to communicate with distant towns and army units, they can't coordinate any way but with messengers, and that lets me roll across Flaur more or less unresisted."

Virren took on a thoughtful look, then his eyes widened. "Clever!" he said with a smile.

"I've had time to think about this, Virren. Now, if you don't mind, you can help us take it apart, then me and Nightfall will walk the pieces back to the army and put it back together. I'll be using it as soon as we get it reassembled."

"I'd be happy to," he smiled.

It didn't take Kyven and Nightfall very long to walk the pieces back to the main host of the army, which was in the act of packing up the camp to get ready to move with the coming darkness when Kyven appeared with the first piece, one of the baseplates. It only took a single order to stop the camp from moving, and after enlisting Stalker's aid, the large wolf Shaman oversaw the reassembling of the device even as Kyven and Nightfall brought the pieces. They brought back the pieces in order, so Stalker only had to have his helpers put them together.

Once the arch was brought in, there was quite a large group around the device watching as Kyven used two long tendrils of solid shadow to set the arch in place, and then a single touch on the side of the device caused the pieces to fuse back into its whole. Almost everyone he knew was gathered around him along with many Arcans he didn't, Lightfoot and Lucky standing beside Ebony, Fastpaw standing by them, and Sunny hovering nearby.

“So, this is it,” Stalker said, looking up at the top of the arch. “And this device will alter reality?”

Kyven nodded. “And I’m going to use it right now,” he said. “I need that crystal Clover made for me.”

“I have it packed with your things, Shaman. I’ll go get it,” Ebony declared, then she hurried off.

“What are you going to do, brother?” Stalker asked.

“Break every talker in Flaur,” he replied immediately, looking at the arch himself as he started preparing himself for the task at hand. “Fastpaw, you did as I asked and set things up so the scouts don’t use talkers?”

The tall spotted cat nodded. “Yes, Shaman, we haven’t used them for two days now.”

“Are the host sentries doing the same, Lightfoot?”

She nodded without speaking.

“Good, so this won’t hurt us. But someone warn Clover and Dancer that their talkers are about to die.”

“I’ll take care of it, brother,” Stalker said, then he stepped away a moment so he could use Shaman magic to pass on the message.

When Ebony returned with the crystal, he used shadowy tendrils to set it into the socket at the top of the arch, and it immediately began to glow with a deep azure light. That told Kyven that Virren’s work was as perfect as it felt to the touch, because that was what it was supposed to do. That crystal would help Kyven, augmenting his own strength and also maintaining his change to reality even after he stopped concentrating on the effect, but it wouldn’t last all that long. Despite the tremendous size and power of the crystal, the arch would consume that power very quickly. He stepped between the legs of the arch, turned around, and took several deep breaths, going through what he had to do carefully in his mind, practicing just *how* he’d have to alter reality to permanently break every talker in

Flaur. When he was sure of his method, he cracked his knuckles and looked at the large gathering of Arcans. “Alright, brother, here we go,” Kyven said to Stalker, but loud enough for everyone to hear. “Do *not* remove me from the arch, , even if I pass out. You do not touch me or come within ten rods of the device until the crystal up there depletes and shatters, no matter what happens. Do you understand?” he asked, pointing up at the crystal over his head.

“I understand, brother,” he replied.

“Everyone,” he called. “This is where you come in. I need everyone watching to believe in me. You don’t have to pray or idolize, you just have to have the true belief that I can do this. I’m asking for your trust and your confidence. Your belief in me, in this device, will make what it does stronger. The more you believe in what it does, the stronger its effect, and the easier things will be for us as we march north. If you have absolutely any doubt whatsoever in me or in what I’m about to do, then you need to leave,” he warned. “Your doubt will weaken the arch and make what I’m about to do that much harder.”

Not a single Arcan left. They all stood there, watching him, and Lightfoot gave him a single, eloquent nod, her expression serious.

“Alright. Here we go,” he said with a cleansing exhale, then he reached out with both hands and put them on the inside of the arch.

Since the arch was an alchemical device that had no purpose built into it, it was Kyven’s first task to complete Virren’s task by imprinting his own version of reality into the device, which would permanently give it purpose. He opened his eyes to the spirits and formed the intent of his magic in his mind, which would transfer into the arch, and then beseeched his treacherous spirit for the power to cast the spell. She replied with satisfied pride flowing through him with her power, and the entire archway suddenly limned over with magical light as Kyven “taught” the unformed alchemical device what its purpose was. He instilled into it his own power, the power to create illusions, but also the ability to reach directly into reality itself and

make a single change, which would remain in effect until he stopped actively changing reality to suit his desires. But that ability was only its secondary function, for he also taught the device that when it was being used by a Shaman that was already using that magic, to add its power to the Shaman's own power to augment his ability.

That was the true purpose of the device, to amplify Kyven's powers in illusion and give him the strength to impose his version of reality over a larger area than he could ever hope to affect by himself. But even without him using the device, if he was somehow killed or incapacitated, giving the arch the ability to mimic his power would allow one of the other Shaman to use it in a dire emergency...just without the same strength of effect that Kyven could enact.

Once the arch was imprinted, he began in earnest. The large blue crystal at the top of the arch flared with brilliant light as Kyven built the spell of illusion that he needed, a spell that altered the very nature of reality, as Kyven decided that *his* version of reality was the real one. He poured every ounce of his power and his will into his own concept of reality, and in his version of reality, no two talkers shared the same reality, that each one was separate and unique.

That was the key of it. Talkers worked because they were made by the same alchemist who imprinted his own unique concept of reality into the devices, which allowed them to talk to one another and prevented them from talking to a talker made by a different alchemist, using a different version of reality. By removing that commonality, by making every talker within his reach *different*, it *permanently* destroyed the links between talkers. Even after Kyven's spell ended, the effect his spell had on the talkers would remain, because the connections between the talkers had been severed. And that was *permanent*. It would require the original builder of the talkers to relink them...and that fix wouldn't be apparent to anyone that examined the talkers except the alchemist who originally built them, because the reality in the talker would not match the reality of the inspecting alchemist unless they were one in the same. Only the original

builder of a talker could tell how many other talkers to which it could link, because he built it.

Once he had the spell formed in his mind, he beseeched the shadow fox for every iota of power she could supply to him, to give him so much power that he could barely control it. And when she responded, Kyven snapped his head back and almost screamed. It was a raging torrent rampaging through him, and he was *barely* able to channel it in the manner in which he needed to create his effect.

By his fingernails, Kyven managed to hold together his spell and manifest his illusion. It was an illusion without a visual, without sound, without smell or feel, it was an illusion that laid over the eyes of reality itself rather than the eyes of those who viewed it, tricking reality into believing that *his* way was the *true* way. And behind him, he sensed, were the Arcans. Though they weren't focusing on changing reality, their belief in his ability made reality easier to bend, because their belief in him and in his device was making reality much less resistant.

With a loud cry of effort, Kyven felt his version of reality intrude into true reality. A shimmer formed around the arch, and then it burst outward in a sphere of rapidly expanding distortion, like a heat shimmer in the air that moved with tremendous speed, and within that shimmer was the boundary between Kyven's reality and true reality. As that shimmer passed over the talkers in the camp, they enforced Kyven's concept that talkers were unique and different from every other talker. And the instant his vision of reality took hold in them, it permanently severed the magical connections linking them to other talkers sharing their original version of reality. Kyven felt the archway behind his magic, pushing, the archway and the crystal in its top amplifying the power raging through him, causing the boundary between his reality and truth to expand, and expand, and expand, Minars the distortion traveled. It swept over Orlann. It swept over the flat, rich farmlands north of the Flauren city. It passed over Augustus, over Tallasar, over Jackson's Ville, going further and further and further because the change Kyven made to reality was such a small one that it allowed him and the arch to invest almost all of their energy into making the area of effect as

large as possible. The greater the change Kyven made to reality, the smaller the area he could affect, so making this one very tiny change to reality allowed his alchemically-amplified magic to reach across all of Flaur within a matter of seconds.

Instead of having the arch maintain his effect, he poured every mote of magic into pushing the boundary of his effect as far out as possible, consuming both his own energy and the energy of the crystal in the arch in what was a fleeting, momentary change to the fundamental nature of reality, an effect that reached nearly three hundred minars away from Kyven in every direction. The effect was so far-reaching that it crossed into Georvan and the very southeastern corner of Alamar. Still he pushed, putting everything into the spell, the effect, even when he reached the limits of his Shaman ability. And *still* he pushed, investing his own life energy into the spell when he could give it no more magic, to push the effect out as far as possible. Every minar he added to the effect was another Arcan life saved, and so with nearly fanatical devotion and determination, he maintained the spell for several precious, critical seconds after it would have otherwise ended.

Kyven turned almost ashen pale in a matter of seconds, his flesh wilting and turning sallow, and Stalker almost took a step forward when a lock of his raven black hair over his right eye shimmered and then turned bone white, the black hue draining quickly out of the lock, resting over his right eye and temple and spreading down towards his ear.

“What’s happening, Shaman?” Ebony asked in sudden fear.

“He’s putting so much into the device that it’s draining his *life!*” he said, reaching out as he took a step forward, then he closed his large hand into a fist and gritted his teeth. Kyven had warned him not to interfere no matter what until the crystal shattered. But barely two seconds later, the crystal did just that, shattering with an audible crash like the finest china being thrown against a brick wall, the blue fragments evaporating even as they rained down from the top of the arch. Kyven dropped to his knees with

a wheezing exhale, and then he fell flat on his face and laid there, unmoving.

Ebony almost bulled Stalker out of the way as they both rushed to the arch at the same time, with several dozen Arcans behind them rushing forward to aid the fallen Shaman. Stalker reached him first, turned Kyven over, and almost recoiled. His skin was gray, as if the blood had been drained out of it, his eyes were sunken, and his cheekbones were prominent. His nose was bleeding and could possibly be broken from his flat-faced impact with the ground, and that blood was dark, as if it had been leeches of nutrients, and oozed from his nostril slowly. His breathing was fast and shallow, his heartbeat faint and slow, and his musculature had actually lost some of its mass and its tone, so much so that Dancer would be needed to heal him from this self-inflicted injury. Shaman magic could restore some of what he had sacrificed to the device, but the white hair, that would never fade. And by touch, Stalker sensed that Kyven had shortened his own life span by at least a year, had *aged*...and there was nothing Dancer could do about that. The energy of the body he had given to the device could be restored with healing, but the life energy he had sacrificed to his alchemical device could never be restored to him.

Stalker looked up at the device, frowning. If *this* was what it would cost his brother every time he used it...now he understood why Kyven had stressed so vociferously that using the device would be the option of last resort.

“Everyone move back!” Stalker barked, collecting Kyven up in his arms, Lightfoot, Lucky, Fastpaw, and Ebony forming a protective ring around him. “I want a fire built immediately, and enough blankets and bedrolls to form a soft bed for the Shaman to lay upon! We need fresh raw red meat, so I need hunters out to bring back a fresh kill! I want guards around that device, nobody come within ten rods of it! Everyone else, we do not move until the Shaman awakens and Dancer returns to heal him. Lightfoot, post sentries and get scouts out! Move, people, move!” he snapped, and that caused a sudden flurry of scrambling Arcans as they rushed away to do his bidding.

Ebony kept a worried hand on Kyven's shoulder as Stalker carried him to an open area where Arcans were already stacking blankets and bedrolls near where others were already lighting a fire of hastily laid wood. When there were enough to form a soft, well-insulated bed, Stalker laid him atop them and then covered him with four blankets. "He'll need both raw meat and thick broth, Ebony," Stalker told him.

"I'll make the broth and keep it hot for when he wakes up," she replied. "Is he going to be alright?"

"With healing and time to recover, yes," he replied as Vasha looked down at Kyven with growing concern, prancing a bit on her heavy hooves. Sirra and Dauro crowded in as well, the male whining a bit in concern and fear as he sniffed at Kyven's face. "He'll be alright, friends," Stalker told them. "He just needs to rest."

Sirra laid down beside the piled blankets and bedrolls, her eyes never leaving Kyven.

"The Shaman never made mention that the device was dangerous, Shaman," Ebony said as she unpacked cooking supplies. "Sunny, go get us a kettle."

"Yes, Ebony," the rabbit replied, rushing off.

"Kyven is a man of secrets, Ebony," Stalker told him as he put another blanket over his human brother. "And a man of almost reckless bravery, to give so much of himself for the rest of us." Stalker pushed Vasha's snout out of the way before he stood up. "I'll get in touch with Dancer and have her return immediately," he told them. "Until I return, keep him warm and don't let the others crowd him. He's in no mortal danger, but he needs to rest. Ebony, if he wakes up before Dancer returns, you do not let him out of that bed no matter what."

"I'll make sure of that, Shaman," she replied firmly as Sunny raced back with a large black kettle in her hands. "We need fresh, clean water for

the kettle, Sunny, fresh bones for broth stock, and find Striker and get him back here.”

“Yes, Ebony,” she replied, her ears bobbing, and she raced off again.

Lightfoot and Lucky ran back to the camp. “The sentries and scouts are setting up,” she reported. “How is he?” she asked with emotion brimming in her voice, her hand reaching down and patting Dauro’s shoulder.

“Weak, but he’ll recover,” he replied. “Excuse me a moment, I need to get in touch with Dancer and have her return. My healing ability is a pale shadow compared to hers.”

Stalker moved away to make contact with Dancer without noise or distractions, both fearful for and strangely *proud* of his brother. If anyone had any doubt as to Kyven’s devotion to the Arcan people or his cause, then this would crush them. For him to do what he did, to sacrifice a portion of his own life energy to further his plans and goals...it was almost insanely brave. But at the same time, to know that he cared so much for the Arcans, for his brothers and sisters, that he would go to such lengths, it made him both humble and proud that Kyven Steelhammer was his brother. Kyven’s devotion to the Arcans was beyond doubt, and Stalker could not help but feel that once the Arcans understood just what Kyven had done for them, that their loyalty to him would become so powerful that they would move mountains for him. His act of sacrifice and bravery could not help but move those to whom he had given so much, and when that man was the commander of an army, it gave him fanatically loyal soldiers that would follow him into hell.

Which was exactly where they were going to go.

It was a dark night, surprisingly cool for late summer, hinting that winter might be early and severe. But Field Marshall Antonio DeVaur was shivering for a reason that had nothing to do with the cold.

There was no contact with home now, in any form. No talker in the entire army whose sister unit was in Flaur worked any longer. Somehow, some way, that *fucking* Shaman had come up with some way to defeat talkers. His Army talkers, the personal talkers of several officers that allowed them to talk to their wives and families, none of them worked. Talkers with sister units that *weren't* in Flaur worked normally, but any talker that had a sister unit if Flaur was now dead.

Not depleted. *Dead*. One of the army alchemists had inspected several talkers, and it was his opinion that the talkers *had no sister unit*. The alchemical links between the talkers they had and their sister talkers in Flaur had been severed, and that it was *permanent*. The talkers were now useless. And the only way DeVaur could even fathom something like that happening was that that *fucking* Shaman had to have had something to do with it.

How did things get to this point? DeVaur went over it in his mind, and over it, and over it. Many long hours he sat in his command tent and just stared at a map of Flaur, red lines crossing out all the villages south of Cresano, the village of Palvio circled. He just stared at those red lines and that red circle and he thought, and he thought, and he thought. He thought about what Steelhammer had said, thought about his threat to DeVaur's wife and sons, and stared at those red lines.

After nearly three hours, he came to a sobering conclusion, and what was for him, a personally humiliating one. He had been outmaneuvered. Looking at the map, he saw the truth of what was going on clearly, saw the stark reality of the situation. Steelhammer had engineered all of this, had used the intent of the armies of Noraam for his own benefit. He had tricked the generals of the armies into fighting each other so he could do nothing less than destroy all of Noraam.

The man was mad, insane. He was a zealot, a fanatic. It was within his capacity to conduct a war of genocide, because the man had proved many times that he had no *humanity* whatsoever. Kyven Steelhammer had said that he would completely destroy Flaur, Alamar, Georvan, and Carin, and

DeVaur fully believed that *he was capable of it*. Not just militarily capable, but *psychologically* capable. He was a man that would kill babies if it furthered his perverted, twisted goals. He was ruthless, he was unscrupulous, and he was completely merciless.

But Steelhammer said it best. Just because he was mad, it didn't mean that he was stupid. After studying what few reports he had about what was going on back home and adding them to Steelhammer's own admissions, he realized that the Grand Marshall was right. There *was* a threat to Tallasar. There was a threat to the entirety of Flaur for that matter. And if Steelhammer destroyed Flaur, got all those Arcans behind him, he could very well march all the way across Noraam and completely wipe it off the map. By the time he got into the Free Territories, he very well might have an Arcan army numbering in the hundreds of thousands of freed slaves, a force so large that it could defeat a kingdom's standing army, but what was more important, was so large that it would obliterate every lightly defended farm, village, and township it marched across like some kind of virulent plague. They would be like locusts, swarming into a region, killing nearly everyone and taking everything from those that remained, leaving them starving and homeless. With a force that large willing to commit genocide against humanity, he would remake the settled lands where the Arcans were the ones in control and the humans were the slaves.

And at the moment, there was little that he could do.

He sighed and looked up at the starry sky, with nothing but his thoughts as he waited. As ordered—and after figuring things out, he'd have done it anyway—every man he could get on a horse was riding for Flaur with all possible speed. The only horse left in the entire army was his own, but he could afford to wait a while because his mount had alchemical horseshoes that would allow him to catch up with the men. His horse could run with magical speed and endurance, and that gave him the ability to wait here with the infantry for word to get back to him.

The men were silent and grim. DeVaur had explained what was going on to them, to make them fully understand the gravity of the situation and

motivate them when the time came to pull out. The men were already packed and ready to march, and would be leaving as soon as there was enough light to see the road. They were dismantling their fortifications, packing their artillery and siege weapons, and the other armies knew it.

That was why he was still here. He had made the unprecedented move of requesting a meeting of all army commanders in the no-man's land between the two army lines, where he would tell them exactly what was going on. He was waiting for replies to reach him, both from the other commanders and also from a wild card.

The talker in his hand wasn't the one that spoke with his wife or with command back in Tallasar, this particular talker was picked up in Avannar after it was sacked, removed from the Loreguard headquarters, and it still worked. The man who had the sister unit was one of the Loreguard's last and best generals, General Taggan Wild, who had escaped from Avannar with a sizable portion of his army and the surviving Loremasters. DeVaur was waiting for Wild to answer his request for parlay over the talker.

He didn't have to wait much longer. "This is Wild," a strong, deep, slightly gravelly voice came over the talker.

"General, this is Field Marshall DeVaur," he said, speaking Noravi. "We need to talk."

"About?"

"I just received extremely disturbing news from Flaur, General, which changes everything and matters to everyone." He methodically went over everything, describing Steelhammer's actions thus far, the chilling conversation DeVaur had had with him, and now the development with the talkers. "I am so convinced of the Shaman's claims that I am abandoning the northern campaign and will march my army back to Flaur as fast as they can possibly get there," he told Wild. "He has to be stopped, General Wild. Even if it means that I must sacrifice most of Flaur, he has to be stopped, for the sake of all humanity in Noraam. He's not going to stop at the Flauren border. He will march those Arcans into Alamar and Georvan, and

he will conduct his campaign of genocide against *them* just as he has done against my Flauren countrymen. I'm telling you this both because you need to know, and that there's a chance that my men may overtake your army. I've already told the Colonel in command of the cavalry riding for Flaur not to engage you. They will be flying a truce flag, General, and they won't attack. I ask, nay, I beg that you don't interfere with them. They are trying to save my kingdom from the ravages of that insane Shaman and his army of bloodthirsty Arcans."

"I can attest to the talkers," he grunted. "Some of our talkers don't work anymore, and the alchemists say that they've been permanently destroyed. They were talkers linked to units of Loreguard near the Flauren border. I'll discuss this information with the Loremasters, Field Marshall. But as far as your cavalry is concerned, if they come up behind us, as long as they take no offensive actions against my men, I'll allow them to pass."

"Thank you, General," DeVaur said with honest gratitude. "I'll be riding to catch up to them as soon as I finish up here. I've asked for a parlay of all the generals. This is something that they need to know."

"Field Marshall, a messenger," one of his sentries called. DeVaur looked up and saw a Mallan officer holding a white flag.

"I have to go, General. By your leave, call me back on this talker at any time, once you have more information."

"I will. Good luck, Field Marshall."

"You too, General." He looked at the young, handsome Mallan officer, in his smart gray uniform. "Lieutenant, is it?"

"Yes, sir," he replied. "I carry a message from General Braddock Banner. He agrees to your request for a personal meeting. At sunrise, he will be at the pavilion your message said your men will set up."

"Very good, Lieutenant. Thank you. Sergeant, this officer may return to his commander. Escort him back to his horse."

“Yes, Field Marshall,” he said, saluting.

It was a long and cold night where he got no sleep, pacing the packed camp as his men tried to get some sleep before their long, arduous march. Over the night, the Balton general also agreed, and his Georvan allies had also agreed to the meeting. His men had already set up the tent in the no-man’s land under the flag of truce, and the Baltons and Mallans had allowed them to do so. All night, all DeVaur had was time, time to think, time to worry, time to plan. Steelhammer was insane, he was completely insane, but he was *cunning*, and the more he looked at things since Cheston, he was starting to see the grand plan behind Steelhammer’s actions. And it was a humbling thing, in a way, to have been duped so easily by the man. DeVaur had fallen into the trap of believing that Steelhammer was little or no threat, of not seeing just how dangerous someone like Steelhammer could be. His illusions and his ability to travel vast distances very quickly had allowed him to maneuver DeVaur into this position.

DeVaur was certain now that this entire war was nothing but the Shaman’s little game. He had somehow manipulated *everyone* into this situation, where the armies were deadlocked in the northern Territories, and that left him free to rampage across the southern tip of Flaur on a mission of genocidal intentions. Steelhammer’s intent all along wasn’t to free the Arcans as he originally claimed, but to wipe out human civilization on Noraam.

Kyven Steelhammer wanted to destroy all the kingdoms of Noraam and replace them with Arcans. He wanted to turn the humans into the slaves and the Arcans the masters, reversing the roles...and he was going to accomplish that by killing so many people that the Arcans would have no real resistance. He wanted to destroy *everything*, wipe it away and allow his perverted vision of Arcans living in control of Noraam to come to pass.

Those were the actions of a madman, but DeVaur was equally convinced of just that, that Kyven Steelhammer *was* a madman. He was completely insane, no doubt driven insane by that Trinity-cursed Shaman magic that he could do. But, that insanity did not in any way impact or

hinder his intelligence or his cunning. The fact that he was an *intelligent* madman made him just that much more dangerous, because he had the intelligence to pursue his demented, twisted goals.

When sunrise finally arrived, DeVaur rode his mount by himself towards the pavilion, which no doubt raised quite a few eyebrows among the men behind the fortifications on the north side of the valley. DeVaur was riding to that meeting alone, without an honor guard, without even his other senior command staff. The Balton and Mallan generals were already there, them and their aides in the tent waiting, and no doubt told about DeVaur's approach by the honor guard of ten men that had accompanied them, which was ancient Noraam tradition in matters of war. DeVaur dismounted as the Georvan commander galloped up behind him with his honor guard, coming from the Georvan section of the lines, and he all but jumped off his horse when he got there. "Now are you going to explain why your men are forming up to march, DeVaur?" he demanded of DeVaur as the two of them walked into the tent. "And why you recalled your cavalry and infantry just two hours before we were going to attack Atan? My men were quite shocked to see your infantry take a sudden left turn and take off down the Green Valley like their asses were on fire."

"In a moment, Hanson," he said as the men within stood in respect. "Gentlemen, thank you for accepting my offer of a meeting. Please excuse me if I sound rude, but if nobody minds, we can skip the pleasantries and get right to the heart of the matter. After I explain things, you'll fully understand why."

"You called this meeting, Field Marshall, so the floor is yours," Banner said.

The three generals took seats around the negotiation table, but DeVaur stood in front of it. He went over the situation in Flaur and his conversation with Steelhammer in detail, pointing out the abduction of his own family and the Shaman's threat to kill them should he not attack the Baltons and Mallans, and when he was done, he looked at the other three men with a sober, grim look. "As soon as I leave this conference, I will be marching my

men back to Flaur to try to save it,” he told them in a simple voice that vibrated with emotion. “Though it will cost me my wife and sons, at this point I have to look at the big picture. The loss of my family is as nothing compared to the destruction of the entirety of Flaur. My wife would be furious with me if I was so selfish as to try to save her while the rest of our kingdom burns. And if we can’t stop him, then he will destroy *every kingdom on Noraam*,” he said in an intense voice. “You gentlemen don’t know him the way I do. You didn’t hear the tone of his voice as he promised to exterminate every human he could get his hands on. You don’t know how much of a zealot he is,” he said, gripping the hilt of his officer’s saber. “He won’t stop with Flaur, Alamar, Georvan, and Carin as he claims. He hates us, he hates his own people, and I am convinced that he means to kill us *all*, even the northernmost kingdoms. I am so certain of it that I will not be posting a defensive rear guard as we form up to leave. You gentlemen could easily attack my troops as we withdraw, but I am gambling on your basic humanity. I have to save as much of Flaur as I can before Steelhammer and his freed Arcans destroy it. And if we fail, then I suggest in the highest possible terms that you consider returning at least a portion of your own forces to your home kingdoms, so you might protect it from him when he arrives.”

“It’s a plausible story, Field Marshall, but the simple fact of the matter is, right now a state of general war exists between our kingdoms,” Banner said. “How can I be sure of your claims?”

“I can offer no proof but my own actions, General,” he replied. “As I said, when I return to my men, I’ll have them take down our fortifications and pack as much as we can use that won’t burden my men, then we will force march all the way back to Flaur. But look at me and say that the Shaman is not capable of it, Banner. You’ve spoken to him. You know what he’s like.”

“He seems a rather droll and sarcastic fellow to me,” the commander of the Balton armies, General Hannover Dorset, mused. “And his intelligence was always spot-on perfect.”

“But he never worked for *us*, Hanny,” Banner noted. “He has been working for the Arcans. I have to say, DeVaur, that this might all be a trick to have us pull our forces from Atan and allow the Arcans to advance out of the mountains.”

“That is why I have something of an idea, General,” DeVaur told him. “Everything the Shaman has done has been to put us in this position, where we hold back an Arcan army to the north while he runs rampant in the south. If we pull to the south to stop him, the northern Arcans can break out and cause total destruction across the northern kingdoms. He set things up so our internal squabbling would hold us in position and give him free reign to destroy the southern kingdoms,” he explained. “With ours and the Georvan forces up here trying to secure the last of the producing mines, unwilling to cede them to the other kingdoms, it was his hope that our focus on the seriousness of our mission would make us hold our position until it was too late to stop him. Every day that goes by, he frees more and more Arcans, and that means that his army grows. Every day, it grows, gentlemen. And we believe that he’s used his ability to travel vast distances quickly to bring Arcans from the northern armies down to the south where they can train the freed slaves, as well as ferry weapons and supplies to them to make them fully armed. What few reports I got from my headquarters before he destroyed the talkers said that freed Arcans were armed with muskets and were operating as if they’d received training.”

“And?”

“And, General Dorset, it means that we’ve been led into a trap,” he replied. “We relied so much on the Shaman’s ability to gather information that we allowed him to maneuver us into a box canyon, and now he has us right where he wants us. Not the day after we reached Chardon and started fortifying in preparation from an attack from your forces, the Shaman attacked the Flauren city of Parai and one of the largest plantations on the peninsula, freeing nearly a thousand Arcan slaves. He used those Arcans to free more Arcans, and more Arcans, and now he’s rampaging across Flaur with a mob of freed Arcans so large that they’ve managed to destroy every Army detachment sent out to stop them, killing every male adult and child,

even *infants*, burning down anything with a roof, and taking every scrap of food. He's committed so many atrocities against my people that I can't even relate all of them to you," he said with a sigh. "He led us up here, he put us in this situation, and now that he thinks we're too deeply entrenched to back out, he's revealed his true intentions. But we can use that against him," he said, crossing his arms. "And it will only take a *little* cooperation between our armies."

"Speak on," Banner said, putting his elbow on the table.

"I can't speak for my Georvan compatriot, but I for one say that we look after our own," he said. "Dorset, Banner, you have a clear path to Atan once I pull my men out, and we will not impede you. In fact, we *need* you to attack Atan with all possible haste," he declared. "We cannot allow that bitch Pannen and Danvers to fortify Atan any more than they already have. Yes, it means that your forces will take the mines, but at this juncture, the mines are the *last* thing on my mind," he said honestly. "I have a kingdom to save. The fact that we may not have access to a supply of crystals means nothing if all of my people are either dead or starving. I would suggest that once my men are clear, and you're certain we're not just pulling out as some kind of elaborate trap, that you march on Atan. General Hanson here already has his mountaineers in position to attack Atan. I would ask him to hold off his attack until your men arrive, that way *you* can work with him instead of *us*. But I would also suggest, Marik, that you return a portion of your forces to protect Georvan should the Shaman get around us," he warned. "We allow the northern armies to deal with the Arcans holding the mountains while we return to the south and deal with Steelhammer and his army of freed slaves. This isn't about crystals any longer. This is about saving humanity from being conquered and enslaved by the Arcans."

The three generals looked at each other, then Hanson spoke up. "Your claims match some of the information I've received from our central command. The King of Flaur told our king what happened, and it got back to my commanding officer. I think you put on a convincing enough argument for me to listen to you," Hanson stated. "I'll send back ten thousand men to Georvan, and if you don't mind, they'll march with you."

They'll split off when you reach Lanna, and once there, they'll receive orders from our central command as to what to do next. I'll send Colonel Farin to command them."

"I have no problem with that," DeVaur nodded.

"And if you gentlemen will agree to an equal division of whatever crystals we can pull from Atan, I have no problems coordinating with you," he said to the two northern generals. "My mountaineers are already in position to attack the rear and flanks of the Arcan army. All we need is someone to attack from the front so we can surprise them."

"You have my word on that, Hanson," Dorset said, to which Hannover nodded. "We'll march for Atan as soon as DeVaur's men are clear. Do you need any supplies or equipment for the march, Field Marshall?" he asked.

He shook his head. "We're well supplied, but thank you for the offer, General," he replied. "Hanson's men have all the intelligence you'll need to know the situation in Atan. It won't be an easy thing, Generals. The Arcans are dug in deeply, and they're commanded by that bastard Danvers."

"That makes even a mob of Arcans formidable, if they'll listen to him," Hannover grunted. "Danvers' exploits are well known throughout the North."

"We'll get our men ready to march as soon as we get back," Dorset stated. "But to prevent worry among your men, we won't dismantle our fortifications until your men are out of sight. We don't want them worrying about us when you have something far more important to do."

"Thank you for that, gentlemen," he said with a nod. "Hanson, get your men formed up and on the move as quickly as possible. We will not wait for them, they'll have to catch up to us," he told the Georvan.

"They'll do just that, DeVaur," he assured.

"Very well then, I think we're done here. From this point forward, gentlemen, I suggest in the highest possible terms that if the Shaman shows

himself to you, that you try to kill him. He's the commander of the Arcan slaves. Kill him, and they fall apart. And don't trust anything he says. He is now our enemy, he's the enemy of all *humanity*. If you can kill him, do so. It will save you a lot of grief later on."

"I'd have to agree with that," Hanson nodded.

"We should be on the move by two hours after sunrise," he told his fellow commanders. "Good luck in your attack on Atan, gentlemen."

"Speed of the Trinity hurry you back to Flaur in time, DeVaur," Dorset told him.

"Thank you. Gentlemen," he said thickly, nodding his head, then he turned and swept quickly from the tent, the steps of a man in a desperate hurry but still trying to at least *look* in control.

The three generals looked at each other after DeVaur left, then they heard his horse's hooves pounding away. "Is he even close to right, Hanson?" Dorset asked.

Hanson nodded grimly. "What he said matches what I heard from General Tellon, the commander of the army," he replied. "No talkers linked to talkers along the Flauren border or further south work anymore, but what we heard before they went dead was that a large army of Arcan slaves was rampaging across southern Flaur. But, we also heard that the King was keeping that a secret."

"Why would he do that?" Hannover asked.

"We're not sure. But only the army units being sent out to stop the Arcans were being told of the situation, and they were ordered to keep quiet."

"Probably to avoid causing a panic," Dorset surmised.

"Whatever it is, now no talker works anywhere even close to the Flauren border, and the Flauren army units still in Flaur are converging on Tallasar like their asses were on fire. Whatever we may believe, *they*

certainly take what's going on down there seriously. And given who's leading those Arcans, I think DeVaur is doing the right thing. Enough to send ten thousand of my own men back to Georvan to reinforce our men."

"How so?"

"Steelhammer is dry, witty, and urbane in his own way, but don't ever believe for a second that he's anything but a stone cold killer," he replied grimly. "I think he's entirely capable of massacring civilians and murdering infants. But more than that, he's *smart*, and his ability to move around lets him see everything in ways we could only dream. He'll know exactly where every Flauren unit is positioned, and his damned illusions and ability to infiltrate enemy HQs to gather intelligence will let him get his hands on the Flauren battle plans. He's a man that will know everything his enemy is going to do, and that'll let him take a ragtag band of freed Arcan slaves and turn them into a viable threat to *any* army. Shit, if I knew every move my enemy was going to make, I could conquer all of Noraam with a force of fifty thousand men," he snorted.

"That...is a damn good point," Hannover said slowly. "Since we're already here, we may as well go over what you know of Atan, while DeVaur pulls his men out. That way we'll be ready to attack once we arrive."

"Sure thing, Hannover," Hanson nodded. "I have to go issue the orders to get that force of men on the move south, and I'll come back with the maps we have of the region."

"Then let's meet back here in two hours," Dorset offered. "That way we can get some breakfast and relay this development to our kings."

"That sounds like a plan, General," Hanson said.

After Hanson left, Hannover and Banner exited the tent and mounted. "You think we can trust the Georvans?" Hannover asked.

"For an equal share of the crystals, yes. The Georvans were only allied to the Flaurens for a share of the crystals. They'll ally with us for the same.

Look,” he said, pointing. Banner followed his pointing finger and saw the Flauren soldiers already bending to the task of taking down what parts of the fortifications they could carry with them to erect at their nightly campsites. “DeVaur wasn’t joking. I think that even if what he said isn’t true, he believes that it is.”

“He does have something of a point,” Hannover noted as they turned their horses to the north, their twenty men forming up behind them. “With most of the Flauren army up here, it *would* be a perfect opportunity to take advantage of the situation. From what I remember, Flaur keeps very little in the way of armed garrisons in their interior. If someone could manage to get an army past their naval lines and land them on the southern tip of the peninsula, they could do some major damage.”

Banner nodded. “That must be what Steelhammer did. Used that magic of his to take a large enough force into Flaur, attack enough remote plantations to free enough Arcans to form the foundation of an army, use the soldiers he took with them to train them, then use them to attack lightly defended plantations and villages in the Flauren interior. If he attacked enough of them and managed to capture the Arcans, he might have several thousand Arcans behind him now, and that *is* a threat. Especially since the man can go just about anywhere and find out just about anything.”

“It sure took the sass out of DeVaur,” Hannover said dryly as they neared their lines. “He was a pompous ass every time I talked to him but today. Today he was polite, even deferential.”

“The man’s going to lose his family, Hanny. The Shaman has them, and he’s going to kill them because he didn’t attack us. I think that would make any man pensive.”

“That’s true. I shouldn’t have said that,” he grunted. “It was unkind of me.”

“I know one thing. As soon as we get back to camp, I’m calling Delaina on the talker and having her take the girls and stay at her mother’s

townhouse in Annapo,” Banner grunted. “If Steelhammer went after DeVaur’s family, he might come after *ours*.”

“That’s a fair point. I think I’d better do the same. I can send Luci and the kids to her sister’s farm, I doubt the Shaman knows about it.”

Stepping out of the shadows directly in front of Danna’s command tent, Nightfall brushed her long, thick, almost sinfully luxurious black hair over her shoulder, feeling the tips of it brush against the base of her tail. Danna was in there, her clawed hands on the edge of a table with Danvers and several of the high-ranking officers in the army, poring over a map, debating something. They both glanced at her as she stepped in, allowed inside without challenge by the two armored guards standing just outside. “Nightfall,” Danna called. “You have news?”

“Yes, Danna,” she replied. “The Flaurens are leaving.”

“Leaving? As in preparing to march?” Danvers asked quickly.

“Yes, Wilson,” she replied with a nod. “I overheard a meeting between the human generals just at sunrise. DeVaur is going back to Flaur to stop Kyven, and he’s taking his entire army.”

Danvers breathed out a sigh, and Danna smiled. “Kyv said he could pull DeVaur out of the Territories,” she said with a relieved smile. “That’s got to buy us at least three more days, Wilson.”

“Time we can use well, at least to shore up our main defenses. But the war starts today, Danna. The Mountaineers.”

“Them,” she grunted, looking at the map. “I take it you’re suggesting we attack them?”

“They’ll never expect it,” he replied with a nod. “Right now they think we have no idea they’re there. They have no idea we have our own units in place to attack *them*. Tonight, just after sundown, we should eliminate the

Georvan Mountaineers here, here, and here,” he said, tapping the map in three places. “That will cripple any attempt they make to attack our rear.”

“There’s more to tell, Danna,” Nightfall interrupted. “The Georvans are now allied with the Baltons and Mallans, promising to help for a portion of the crystals they can recover from the mines. They intend to wait for them to march here then aid them in their attack on Atan.”

“That’s not a surprise,” Danna said. “Did you overhear their plans?”

She shook her head. “They’re meeting again in a couple of hours to discuss their strategy. I’ll make sure to be there to listen to them.”

“You definitely need to be there, Nightfall,” Danvers told her. “With Kyven busy to the south, you and Toby have been invaluable replacing him as our eyes and ears.”

“I do what I can,” Nightfall said modestly.

“I’d be doing it too, but Wilson won’t—“ Danna said, but then she cut herself off as she felt something cold and *malicious* slide over her, like a cold wind that went completely through her body, a shifting in the texture of the shadows in the room. Nightfall gasped and took a quick step back, her long black hair billowing over her shoulder as she looked upwards, her arms out and her fingers flexed so she could bring her claws to bear with maximum effectiveness if necessary.

“What the fuck was *that*?” Danna gasped, looking towards the east, the direction that ominous wind traveled.

“That was within the shadow world,” Nightfall said quickly, crisply, her eyes both calculating and fearful. “That must be the evil force Kyven described coming across in the shadow world. Danna, we dare not shadow walk,” she said, nearly ordering. “And someone needs to warn Toby over his talker not to shadow walk either.”

“And Kyv,” Danna added. “He needs to know that it showed up again. He said he was going to find out what it was and a way to keep it from

being a threat. Longclaw, go get any Shaman that can send messages long distances,” she ordered one of her guards. “And get in touch with Toby and tell him about this, tell him not to shadow walk until we call him back.”

“Yes, General,” he said with a nod, then rushed off.

“Why not use a talker?” Nightfall asked.

“Kyven’s already destroyed all the talkers in Flaur,” Danvers answered. “Clover warned us yesterday afternoon about it. I just hope he’s awake now. Clover said that using the device was very hard on him, and he was so weak afterwards that the army had to stop moving so he could rest.”

“He should be, he’s exhausted himself before and was up and about the next day,” Danna said confidently, then she shivered. “No wonder Kyv was so worried about that thing. I’ve never felt anything so, so, so...*evil*.”

Nightfall nodded. “There is darkness in the shadow world, but nothing like *that*,” she added. “Now I understand why Kyven never taught us to walk into the depths of the shadow world. If things like *that* lurk there, we are wise to stay on the border of the real world at all times.”

It was Sungold that returned with the guard. She was one of the rarest and most unique Arcans on Noraam, for she was an Arcan of a big cat from Fria called a *lion*. She was very tall, burly, and had sharp, large brown-amber eyes. Since she was an Arcan of a species of animal not native to Noraam, her kind were extremely rare. She was the only lion Arcan Danna had ever seen, just the way Patches was the only red panda Arcan she had ever seen. Sungold was like Lightfoot, she refused to wear any clothing at all, so it was a naked female Arcan that strode into the tent. “I was told you need to talk to Clover?”

“Yes, Sungold,” Danna nodded. “Can you make contact with her?”

“Of course, General. I’ll cast the spell so she can hear everyone in the room, and all of you can hear her.”

“That sounds good.”

A moment later, Clover's voice seemed to emanate out of thin air in front of the tall, burly female Arcan Shaman. *"What is it, Sungold?"*

"Clover," Danna called.

"Good morning, Danna," she said with sincere affection.

"We just had one of those evil things Kyven described in the shadow world pass over us," she said. "We need to tell Kyv about it. Is he awake?"

"No. He's still recovering from yesterday," she answered.

"Still?" Danna asked.

"He very nearly did himself permanent harm, Danna, he's not going to jump out of his bedroll this time," she answered calmly. *"He'll need at least two more days of rest before he'll be able to get out of his bedroll. But since we can't wait two days, we've made the decision to leave him behind with a detachment of guards to protect him and allow him to recover while we continue to press the attack. We cannot afford to slow down or the Flaurens will organize resistance in front of us. We cannot wait, not even for Kyven."*

"I didn't realize it was that bad," Danna said with growing worry.

"He's not in any danger, Danna, he just needs rest and he'll be fine. It's just that he'll need more rest than usual this time. Don't worry, friend."

"Well, if you say so," she said, worry still in her voice. "But can you relay the message to whoever's with him so he knows when he's awake?"

"I'll make sure of it," she answered. *"Is there anything else you need?"*

"No, that was all," Danna answered.

"Then excuse my abruptness, but we're currently on the move and I don't want the others to get too far ahead of me. I'll contact you when we stop to tell you about Kyven and our progress in more detail, alright?"

"Alright. Be careful, Clover."

“You too. Goodbye, friend.”

Sungold nodded to tell them the spell was ended, crossing her arms beneath her small, furry breasts. “I hope Kyv’s really alright,” Danna fretted. “That Clover’s not just telling me what I want to hear.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, Danna,” Danvers told her. “Clover isn’t one to hide the truth. And I’m not entirely surprised. Kyven always said that he’s weaker than the other Shaman, yet he used that device to knock out every talker in *Flaur*. It had to have been everything he could handle to do it. I’m surprised he’s not in bed for a week to recover rather than a couple of days.”

“I guess, I didn’t think of it like that,” Danna said, tapping her muzzle. “But, there’s not much we can do about it either way, so I guess we’d better put our minds on what’s in front of us, not what’s going on down in Flaur. I think the fur’s gonna start flying in just a couple of days, Wilson. We’d better start getting ready for facing the Baltons and Mallans instead of the Flaurens, and dealing with the Georvan Mountaineers.”

“We shouldn’t have too much trouble, Danna, at least as long as we’re only facing them. It’s when the Phioni and other northern armies get here that we’re going to find our backs against the wall. The big question for us will be just when we pull back, and how effectively we do it to draw the enemy into the mountains. The timing will be critical.”

“How long until the Phioni get here?” Nightfall asked.

“Five to seven days,” Danna replied. “They’ve been slowed down by bad weather further to the north. They were marching to the north of us and then were going to swing south, coming in from the northern end of the Green Valley, to prevent us from going that way. The Jenn are right behind them, and the Yora, Hamm, and Mennish armies aren’t far behind. In about two weeks, we’ll have the entire combined armies of the north camped in the valley. When that happens, we start withdrawing, luring them into chasing us out into the northern plains, where the winter cold will be as much our weapon as our muskets and rifles.”

“But the Baltons and Mallans aren’t going to wait for the others. They’ll attack now and try to get control of Atan and the mines,” Danvers added. “So we’ll be fighting all the way up until the others arrive. Our task is to hold back the Baltons, Mallans, and Georvans as long as possible, until the other armies get here, *then* we withdraw. We want all of them here so all of them chase us into the wilderness, and they do it without their wagons and heavy siege weaponry. They’ll never get them through the mountains.”

“That may be, Wilson, but they’re gonna send them up to Two River and send them down by boat,” Danna said.

“I know, Danna, and I’m counting on that,” he smiled. “We’ve already got a plan in place for dealing with enemy boats on the Deep River.”

“It sounds like you have everything prepared,” Nightfall said. “Since I can’t shadow walk right now, I’m going to go get something to eat and rest a while.”

“Go ahead, Nightfall,” Danna said. “I’ll see you later.”

Nightfall stepped from the tent, looking to the east several times as she headed for the cooking area. Now that she’d felt what Kyven had, she fully understood why he was so worried about it. She’d felt darkness in the shadow world, but never felt pure *evil* like that. Whatever that thing was, it reveled in pain, misery, and chaos, it was a miasma that hung around it that was so powerful that it even intruded into the real world. It explained why the entities in the shadow world fled from it, and Kyven’s warnings not to shadow walk when they felt that thing were entirely sensible.

But something else worried her. None of them had ever encountered anything like that thing before, and yet now it appears twice in the span of just a few weeks. Perhaps...perhaps something had changed in the shadow world that made it more active, more willing to come close to the real world. Or perhaps, something going on in the real world was attracting it from the depths of the shadow world.

The war. Something that revealed in pain, chaos, and misery would find an entire continent at war to be quite the lovely and beautiful thing.

Could the war be attracting that thing from the deep shadow world and close to the real world? Could it possibly be the shadow fox Arcans themselves, moving through the shadow world and attracting it the way a rabbit attracted a hawk? Something had to have lured it from its lair deep in the shadow world. Or maybe not, maybe it had been asleep for centuries and only now just woke up and started moving around. Without understanding what it was and not knowing anything about it, she supposed anything was possible.

One thing was for sure. She wasn't going back into the shadow world again for quite a while. She had felt just a pale shadow of that thing and it had chilled her soul. She did *not* want to see or feel the rest of it.

Not one bit.

Chapter 5

The rain certainly didn't make him feel any better.

Wet, cold, and weary, Kyven Steelhammer stood with a sodden blanket wrapped around his shoulders as he supervised ten burly Arcans as they disassembled the metal archway. Behind him, Ebony and the nannies broke down their camp, commanding some fifty Arcan fighters who had stayed behind to protect Kyven as he recovered his strength. The rain had started about three hours ago, a surprisingly cold soaking rain that was very unusual for Flaur. This was the dry season in Flaur, at least relative to the rest of the year, where most of the rain came in the form of short afternoon storms. It had been very dry for the last week, a fact that had been very useful to Kyven and the Arcans, and it seemed that nature was making up for the lack of late afternoon thunderstorms with a very unseasonable steady rain that was decidedly chilly. The coolness that came with the rain seemed to go straight through him and settle deep in his bones, leaving him achy, weary, and very much wishing that he was under a sturdy roof and sitting beside a large cheerful fire.

The archway...he should have known that it wasn't going to be quite so easy. He'd had so many plans for it, but now, now most of those plans were useless. And it was all his fault. When he overextended himself, almost everyone watching had come to the belief that it was the *arch* that had done that to him, and the arch, still an alchemical device in its infancy as per its operation and effect, had *imprinted* their belief. Kyven had told the Arcans that the archway was a device that would only be used as a last resort, and telling them that had reinforced that belief that the reason Kyven said that was because of what the archway did to him. Now, any time he used the arch, it was going to take much more than just his Shaman magic and his will. Now, it was going to take his *life*. The arch was permanently corrupted by the belief of those who had seen its first use, and whoever

used it would have to power it with their magic, with their will, and with their life energy.

Every time he used the arch, it was going to age him, drain his life energy. The stronger the effect he created, the more of his life it would drain. For an Arcan Shaman, the arch was a death trap, since their lifespans were shorter than a human's. But for Kyven, he figured he could use the archway only four more times before it aged him to such a degree that it damaged his ability to use magic.

Shaman magic was dependent on the body, and his body's ability to control and channel that magic would degrade as he aged. When his body aged beyond a certain point, he'd no longer have the physical strength and stamina to use his magic. At that point, he'd no longer be a Shaman, would only have his shadow powers, and he would be all but useless to the Arcans as anything but a scout.

He should have been more careful. He should have realized that the device could be corrupted by the Arcans watching when he decided to push himself past his limits, to the point where his Shaman magic drained away a portion of his own life energy. His lack of wisdom and foresight was going to cost him now, and what was worse, it was going to cost the army in the form of more Arcan dead. He'd planned to use the arch to destroy mana crystals before every major action to rob the humans of their alchemical siege weapons and other devices, perhaps use the arch to turn the tide of battle in his favor if he found his army outnumbered, but now he'd had to carefully pick and choose when and how he used the arch. Now, it *truly* was his option of last resort, because using it too many times was going to kill him. And Kyven had too many plans for the future to allow the arch to drain away his life.

If he was going to die, it wasn't going to be standing in that archway feeling it suck him dry just before his spirit came to claim his soul.

There *were* options, however...just not ones he wanted to entertain. The spell that his spirit had taught him, the spell that drained energy from

another to temporarily bolster his own strength, showed him that there was a way that Shaman magic could take energy from another. And he was rather sure that if he bargained with his spirit, she could restore what the arch drained, since it seemed that Shaman magic was capable of draining the life from another. It would probably take his spirit to take that energy and use it to reinvigorate him, to turn back the clock and give him back the years the arch would have drained to force him to resort to beseeching his spirit. But that too would be a option of pure desperation, if he had to use the arch too many times and found himself on the verge of becoming too weak to use his magic. No deal he'd ever struck with his spirit had ever worked in his favor, and he was honestly afraid of what he'd have to pay if he found himself in the position where his spirit's assistance was his only recourse.

But, that *was* there, in the back of his mind, a subtle temptation to use the arch in a situation other than dire necessity.

The rain made him feel...*old*. Achy bones, tired, sore muscles, the feeling that he'd only be warm again if he boiled himself in a giant cauldron. For a moment, he had a weird sense that this was what Firetail must have been feeling every day, at least until she passed away, and how Arcans like Old Sam dealt with life every day. Kyven was honestly surprised the old Arcan was able to not only keep up with the army, but still do his fair share of the work every day despite the fact that he was the oldest Arcan in the host. And if that wasn't enough, he was teaching some younger Arcans the skills he learned when he was owned by a vet, teaching them basic medicine. Firetail and Old Sam were examples that age may slow some people down, but it certainly didn't stop them...at least until their time came.

Firetail proved that no matter healthy someone appeared, when their time came, there was no stopping it. She had died in her sleep, and had died so suddenly that it took everyone completely by surprise.

Kyven didn't fuss when Ebony pulled the blanket off his shoulders and replaced it with a deep ankle-length cloak that was easily full enough for

him to pull it around him to completely cover him, an article of clothing not worn much in the Free Territories. Cloaks were popular in the colder northern kingdoms for warmth, commonly worn over a stout jacket and leggings or a heavy winter dress as an additional layer to stave off the bitter winter cold, and in Flaur and Nurys primarily as garb worn to deal with rain, as it was very easy to put on and take off. The rain in Flaur, Alamar, and Nurys could come out of nowhere and had almost no transition from dry to thunderous downpour, and a cloak only took a quick second to don. The cloak Ebony put on him was made of a very thin, light material so it didn't get too hot, it was a light tan color with an ornate gold button and silk cord eye at the throat to clasp it, and it was also completely waterproof. Whatever it was made of was woven so tightly that water rolled right off of it rather than soak into it. Of course, that meant that the water dripping from his black hair didn't have anywhere to go but down his neck and back, since the cloak stopped water from the inside as well as the outside.

“Thanks,” he said in a weary voice as he watched two large and very burly bull Arcans set the arch piece on the wet grass. Both of them were more than tall enough to reach up and pull the arch free of the rest of the device. “We’ll be moving out as soon as they have it disassembled. We have some hard traveling ahead of us to catch up to the others. They’re over a day ahead.”

“We should reach them just before they get to Orlann. Besides, you told them not to attack until we got there.”

“They’ll need that time to rest before the attack, so it doesn’t matter if we’re a little late,” he told her as the rain lessened a little, going from a steady soaking to a steady light rain. “This rain isn’t going to help us very much.”

“We’ve walked in the rain before, Shaman,” she said calmly. “If anything, I’ll warm up a little once we get moving.”

Kyven turned and let out a loud, shrill whistle. Seconds later, Vasha trotted up to him, answering his call. “They have the arch key section down,

friend. I'm going to need you to carry it," he told her. "I'll walk with you."

She gave a heavy snort of disapproval, butting him with her snout.

"You can't carry us both, and the arch is more important than I am," he told her calmly. "I'll just use my amulet and go Arcan, that makes the traveling easier."

She pawed the ground with her huge hoof, glaring a little at him.

"I'm *fine*, you big worrier," he assured her. "If we weren't in such a hurry, I would ride you, but we have to catch up to the army. Not only do they need us, but we're vulnerable trailing along this far behind them. If the humans find us before we get back to them, we'll be outmatched. You're the only one here big enough to carry the arch key piece without it slowing you down, and we need speed right now."

She stared at him a long moment, then looked away in disgust.

"I'm so glad you see things my way," he drawled. "Now do me a favor and go find the Lupans. We'll be leaving as soon as we have the pack camped."

Vasha couldn't leave without demonstrating her disapproval, in the form of very nearly knocking him down with her shoulder and foreleg as she turned around. Then, just to make sure of it, she slapped him in the head with her longhaired tail, which stung a little bit when the long, tough hair wrapped around and whipped against his cheek and jaw..

Ebony gave him a slight smile. "She's big enough to tell you how all of us feel, Shaman," she noted.

"She's big enough to think I'm not going to get even with her," he said with a slightly malevolent look back at the Equar.

"I sometimes marvel at how well you understand them," she told him as they watched the Arcans take the two legs of the arch apart. "I can tell when they're hungry or upset or happy, but I can't understand them as

deeply as you can. It's almost like you can talk to them, and they talk back to you."

"It's not magic, it's just that we've traveled together a long time," he told her. "I don't understand them as if they were talking, but I can tell what they're thinking more often than not. And they know me well enough to do the same." He pulled the cloak a little more around him when the wind picked up. "And it shouldn't be a surprise that they can understand us. They're *monsters*, Ebony, don't think of them as just oversized animals. They're a hell of a lot smarter than wolves or horses. I think they're smarter than quite a few people I've known in my life," he said dryly.

"There's no doubt about that, Shaman."

Vasha trotted back with both Lupans behind her. Their wiry fur often made it hard to tell if they were wet or dry, since it rarely wilted from the weight of water unless they'd just jumped into a river. "Well, that didn't take long," Kyven chuckled as he petted Dauro once they reached him. "You two must have been back in camp. We're leaving in a little bit, so stay in camp."

Dauro sat on his haunches beside Kyven, and Sirra nudged Ebony out of her spot beside him to sit on Kyven's other side. Vasha trotted around them and approached the Arcans at the arch, then batted at random Arcans with her nose until they started the process of loading the key piece on her back. She had Kyven's saddle on her back, with a piece of shaped leather put on the saddle to convert it to a cargo saddle. They would load the key piece on the saddle and tie it down, and the large Arcans that had stayed behind would carry the other pieces on their backs. The bull Arcans could have carried the key piece, but it was rather bulky and would be difficult for them to carry easily.

After they loaded Vasha and tied down the arch key piece, the other bearers were loaded up with the other sections. Each one carried the leg sections on their back and shoulders horizontally, the two sides jutting well out from their sides. They had the pieces tied onto them in a way that kept it

from slipping and kept it balanced. They were too heavy for the Arcans to go on all fours, so they wouldn't be going as fast as they could have, but even when only moving on two legs, Arcans could move faster than humans.

When the last two Arcans were loaded up with the arch pieces, Ebony barked commands and waved her hand in a circle over her head, getting the 100 Arcans in their small detachment formed up and ready to go. Kyven absently put his hand on his amulet and willed its activation, then felt that not entirely pleasant sensation like his bones had turned to cold water as he was transformed into his Arcan form. He shook himself almost unconsciously when it was over, stretching a little bit as his tail slashed behind him, reflexively rising up onto his toes so he could walk, a move that didn't change his overall height by very much.

Kyven moved among the arch bearers and gave them several words of encouragement, the Lupans prowling around just behind him, and he took up a position at the lead of the host along with Fastpaw and Ebony. Striker was lurking at the rear of the host with several fighting Arcans, and five young, willowy Arcans bounded across the meadow and into the trees at Fastpaw's command. "Are you ready to go, Shaman?" Ebony asked as she reached them.

"I'll be alright," he replied, his ears flicking under the weight of the hood that was pressing down on them.

Ebony gave him a curious look, then reached over and pulled the hood up and away from his face. "The white patch doesn't carry through to your Arcan form," she noted, turning her head a little sideways.

"That's because this is fur, not hair," he told her absently. "Now let's get moving. We have a lot of ground to cover, and we'll have to be careful until sunset."

They started out and established a brisk pace, moving with careful speed along the same route that the rest of the army had taken. Kyven could see evidence of their passing in trampled grass and the occasional discarded

article, and about a half an hour after setting out, the fresh corpse of a man in torn clothing laying by the side of the road told him that the scouts were doing more than just looking for potential trouble. Given they were moving in the daylight, killing anyone and everyone that might see them was necessary, given what they were carrying and the fact that they weren't moving fast enough to outrun soldiers on horses.

Kyven expected to feel better and better as time went by, and he was both right and wrong. He could feel his strength returning as they moved, as the sun set, the rain stopped, and the clouds moved out to show a brilliant starry sky, but it was replaced by the kind of weariness he knew had nothing to do with his recovery and had everything to do with having to move when he was already tired. With the rain ended and the stars out, his Arcan eyes had no trouble seeing in the darkness, as they doused all lights and moved in dark silence to avoid being spotted or scouted out, and he ignored his exhaustion by going over and over the upcoming battle in his mind. Orlann was the first large Flauren city they would destroy, a city of nearly 10,000 humans and with a current standing garrison of 1,500 men—that figure was not counting the men sent out to stop them, and were now too far away to help Orlann—along with the men they would draft from the civilians to form a militia. His Arcans would be facing around 3,500 to 4,000 defenders, but well over half of them would have no real experience in fighting or battles. They'd be townsmen with muskets. Kyven currently had an army of nearly 2,000 Arcans with another 1,200 non-combatants. They'd be outnumbered, but they held the advantage in this fight because they would know exactly where and how to attack to exploit the weakness of their enemies, they'd be attacking at night when their enemies wouldn't be able to see, and their enemies would have no leadership. Kyven would scout out their defenses, find the holes, and plan his attack to take advantage of them. He would also be killing off the commander of the army garrison to rob their enemies of qualified leadership, as well as using his powers of illusion to send out orders in the guise of the garrison commander to make the city much easier for them to destroy.

Though they'd be outnumbered and would be attacking, giving the defenders the further advantage that came with defense, Kyven had high confidence that they could destroy Orlann with only minor difficulty. After all, it was hard for an army to defend a town when they were facing an opponent that could see in the dark, and had people in it that could infiltrate their city and wreak havoc. Kyven had already looked over the town and had a rough idea of how the army was going to attack.

This attack wasn't going to be as *careful* as earlier ones. They'd attacked Parai and the southern villages with the intent to free Arcans and take supplies, but with Orlann, looting and pillaging would be secondary to the goal of razing the city to the ground and chasing the survivors out into the wilderness. They would take what they could, free all the Arcans they could, but those actions were secondary to the primary objective of burning the city to the ground and scattering its surviving inhabitants. It meant that enslaved Arcans were going to be missed, and that some would die. It meant that they'd lose a lot of supplies that they could use. But given the fact that they were outnumbered in this fight, it meant that they had to engage in this battle with a much more ruthless mindset.

This wasn't an attack to sack Orlann, this was an attack to *destroy* Orlann.

Close to midnight, one of the scouts rushed back to them on all fours, then rose up onto her legs when she reached Kyven and Fastpaw. She was a very young cat Arcan with creamy tan fur, almost tawny, and amber eyes. "Fastpaw, Shaman. Humans in front of us," she said quickly. "About four minars ahead. A large patrol, some fifty men on horseback."

"Are they camped?" Fastpaw asked.

"No, they're moving by alchemical light, following the trail left by the army," she answered. "At this pace, you'll overtake them in about an hour."

Kyven swore, calling a halt to the column, then he opened his eyes to the spirits and caused a illusory map of the area to appear in front of them, hanging in the air. "Where exactly are they?" he asked.

The young, small cat studied the map, then pointed to a place just north of a large stream, running parallel to a main road. “About right here, Shaman,” she replied. “Fifty men on horseback, wearing army uniforms. I didn’t get close enough to see if they were actual army men or just men wearing army jackets.”

“How far are we from the main host? Close enough to have them send fighters back to clear them?” Fastpaw asked.

Kyven shook his head “They’re some forty minars north of us,” he replied. “Too risky for us to tackle, given what we’re carrying, and in our way slowing us down.” He thought furiously for a moment, as the Arcans gathered closely behind him and the Lupans came in from the trees. He took hold of his amulet and willed it to change him, and he felt that slightly unpleasant sensation of his bones turning to cold water as he returned to his human form. “I’ll go take care of it,” he said, flexing his fingers and then closing his fist, working the last of the cold sensation out of his muscles. “Ebony, get the host moving again. The patrol should be out of your way by the time you get there.”

“Are you sure you’re up to this, Shaman?” she asked.

“I’ll be fine,” he told her as he gestured in front of him, causing a shadowy disc to appear vertically, almost like a doorway. His form dissolved away into a ghostly, dark, two dimensional silhouette as he took on his shadow form in preparation of entering the shadow world. “Don’t make too much noise when you get up there, they won’t be all that far away,” he warned, then he stepped into his gateway and entered the shadow world.

Almost without thinking about it, he cast about to locate the *things*, who could not see him or sense him while he was camouflaged by the shadows, and he noticed that there were quite a few of them clustered in one place, almost within sight. Curious, he took a few cautious steps in that direction, approaching the shadowy, phantasmal creatures that had the appearance of men, including the one Kyven had put here, the worker from

the Pens. There were nine of them clustered around something, just standing there staring at it. Kyven moved upwards—there was no gravity in the shadow world—and got into a position to see what they were looking at. It was a shimmering, undulating distortion in the shadow world, and now that he was close enough to see it, it had the same distortion effect as a real object in the shadow world, and thus would attract the *things*. But there was no real object in it distorting effect, it was being caused by something else.

Something else...something that was *attracting* the things.

Kyven backed off quickly, and not a second after he did so, two slashing tentacles of utter blackness lashed out from the center of the distortion. They hooked around the nearest of the *things*, wearing the visage of a burly man with a thick, wild beard, and it looked like the *thing's* back was broken as it was nearly folded in half as it was yanked into the distortion. The *thing* gave a squealing keen that seemed to trail away as if it were yanked a vast distance quickly, and the other *things* scattered when a sudden coldness radiated out from the distortion, the same malevolent sense that Kyven had felt from that creature from deeper within the shadow world.

Kyven didn't run like the *things*, he watched the distortion smooth out and then vanish, as the *things* continued to retreat in almost every direction.

The chance encounter told him much. The dark creature from deep in the shadow world *hunted* the *things*, and it used deception to lure them in, attracting them with a distortion in the shadow world and then snatching its prey. It was also demonstrating that it was *active*, almost as if it had woke up after sleeping, and now it was moving around, it was hunting, and that meant that it posed a real threat to anyone in the shadow world. Kyven made a note to tell the others about that, to avoid those distortions, and he also made a note to himself that when he had the time, he had to come in here and study things more carefully.

There were many questions to answer, like what would happen when the entity ran out of *things* to hunt. Would it go dormant again? Would it

die? Did it need the *things* to survive? Perhaps one way to remove the threat of the dark creature from the deep shadow world was to find a way to get rid of the *things*...which would also make moving around in the shadow world much safer for all the shadow foxes.

Either way, that was an issue for another time. At the moment, he had something very important to do.

Exiting the shadow world nearly a minar in front of the patrol, he quickly went to work. He formed an image in his mind and beckoned the shadow fox for the power to cast the spell, and she granted it. His body shimmered and changed, his face and body replaced by a very young man with swarthy Flauren skin that was pale from blood loss, black hair, and wearing a simple pair of denim breeches and a brown cotton shirt, common garb for a farm worker. Both the breeches and the shirt appeared torn, and the dark skin of his illusion had several minor cuts and scrapes, as well as what appeared to be a musket wound on his chest, just to the right of his breastbone, with his brown shirt stained with blood. He started towards the patrol in what looked like an uncertain gait, the walk of a man who was injured and exhausted, stumbling every so often over unseen things on the ground, so his deception was well seated by the time that the faintest twinkling of the patrol's alchemical lights became visible in the distance. Kyven gave a hoarse shout when those lights got closer, calling out in Flauren for help, and four men on horseback galloped up to him as he staggered towards them, and then fell almost flat on his face as they stopped their horses. They dismounted quickly and helped roll him over on his back, and Kyven knew that he'd given his illusion perfect detail when he saw the looks on their faces, the looks of men who were talking to a man who was about to die.

The patrol leader reached him quickly, dismounting and rushing up to him. "He's shot, Captain," one of the men supplied as the officer knelt by him. "He don't have long," he added in a bare whisper that Kyven supposed the soldier was too low for him to hear.

"What happened, goodman?" he asked in a voice of concern.

“It was Arcans, sir,” he said, his voice weak and waning. “They came out of nowhere, shootin’ at anything that moved.”

“Where, son? Where did they attack you?”

“My farm,” he replied, his breathing speeding up as he gripped the wrist of one of the soldiers.

“Where is your farm? How many were there that attacked you?”

“On Lone Oak Road,” he said, wincing and gritting his teeth. “Not far from the Black Creek.”

“I know where that farm is,” one of the men called. “It’s about three minars from here, Captain.”

“How many were there, son?” the officer asked.

“I dunno, but they were everywhere. Arcans everywhere,” he said, then he gave a grunt of pain. “They took my wife. They grabbed her and dragged her away,” he said with desperation. “You have to save her, sir! You have to save my wife!”

“Tell me as much as you can, and we’ll be able to save her,” the captain said in a gentle voice, putting a firm but careful hand on his shoulder, avoiding getting blood on his hand. “Where did they come from? Where did they go? How many did you see?”

“I dunno how many. I tried to get my wife out into the woods, but one of ‘em shot me, and I blacked out. When I came to, I saw ‘em goin’ towards Kiravi. My wife wasn’t at the farm, they took her. They took her,” he said, giving a weak cough.

“Towards Kiravi?” the captain asked him.

He nodded weakly. “You have to save Maria,” he said, clutching at the officer’s wrist with surprising strength, his fingers trembling on the man’s arm. “I heard her screaming for help. You have to save her.”

“We’ll do everything we can, son,” the captain said reassuringly. “You just lay back and rest a moment, our medic is almost here.”

“I don’t need no medic, sir, I know I’m done for,” he said with a weakening voice. “But you gotta save Maria. You gotta.”

“We’ll do what we can, son. Private, how far are we from Kiravi?”

“About ten minars, sir,” a man replied. “The main group kept goin’ north, it musta been a detachment that went that way.”

The captain frowned. “We can’t leave those villagers undefended. Without talkers, there’s no way to warn them. Corporal, take your squad and keep following the Arcans while the rest of us try to head off that raiding party before they hit Kiravi. Son, how many others were at your farm?”

“It’s too late, Captain, he’s gone,” one of the men kneeling by Kyven said. Kyven’s illusion was no longer breathing, and Kyven detached himself from his illusion, moving away carefully under the illusion of a mouse.

The captain stood up. “I’m afraid we don’t have time to bury this man,” he declared in a strong voice. “Everyone mount up, we have to get to Kiravi before the Arcans attack it and save as many people as we can. Corporal, you and your squad stay on the trail of the main group.”

Kyven watched from the edge of the clearing as the men mounted up and galloped to the north as fast as they felt safe, their alchemical lights dwindling in the distance, and for a moment, he felt...right. *This* is what he was supposed to be doing, not leading Arcans like a general. Tricking a patrol of enemies so his Arcans wouldn’t have to fight them was exactly the kind of thing he’d be doing if he wasn’t stuck leading the army. His skills and his role was espionage, deception, and manipulation, but now here he was, leading freed slaves on a ghastly mission of wholesale destruction. But the Arcans *needed* him to be a general and a figurehead, and a Shaman served where he was needed. He was the only Shaman that could do this, and truth be told, he was one of the few Shaman who had the mental

fortitude to deal with the terrible stress that came with being such a monster. Kyven wasn't particularly proud of that fact, but it was just that, fact. He knew what had to be done, and though he found it personally reprehensible and morally repugnant, he would do what needed to be done, because he was a *Shaman*.

It was his burden to bear, and he would make sure that its weight didn't break the backs of his brothers and sisters.

Kyven moved into the shadow world and got ahead of the patrol, then set himself up about a minar in front of them. He knelt down by a tree and unslung his rifle, loaded a round, and waited in patient silence. About five minutes later, he saw the alchemical lights of the five men who were sent to follow the host. Kyven let the shadows wash over him and all he wore and held, causing him to vanish from sight, enacting the most basic of all his shadow powers. As the men passed by him, he brought a small globe of silence into being, a very small one only around his rifle, then he brought it to his shoulder, opened his eyes to the spirits, and looked through the sights. The sight's magnification did nothing to enhance his spirit sight, but the men were so close that he could easily see them through it. He couldn't see the crosshairs through his sight either, but he was so familiar with it that he knew where those sights were without needing to see them. He centered the closest man to him in his scope, the last man in the five man procession, then he pulled the trigger. The report of the rifle was silenced by his magic, but the effect of his shot was not. The man he hit gave a "*whuaaff!*" and tumbled from his mount, which caused the other four men to stop their mounts and look back at him. Kyven had worked the bolt to load the next round in the chamber before the man hit the ground.

"Are you drunk or something, Virrio?" the man in the lead demanded as Kyven calmly and smoothly centered the next man in his scope, then pulled the trigger again. The man he had targeted had his head snap back unnaturally, and he too tumbled from the saddle.

"Sniper!" the corporal barked, looking around frantically. "Sniper! Find cover!"

The three remaining men spurred their horses, turning it into much more of a challenge as Kyven worked the bolt and moved the rifle steadily to lead the closest of the mounted men, who was riding almost directly away from him. The man slouched in the saddle and then slid off after Kyven shot him low in the back, and Kyven quickly took a line on the next man as he worked the bolt. He pulled the trigger almost the instant the bolt was locked down, and the corporal hunched over after being hit in the side, but managed to stay astride his horse. He slumped nervelessly out of his saddle, however, when the second bullet hit him in the neck, severing his spine. Kyven had to take a few steps out and assume a standing position to take aim at the last man, who very nearly made it to the treeline before tumbling out of his saddle.

Kyven cancelled his sphere of silence, and he was almost shocked at how *weak* he felt just maintaining that spell for a brief moment, something he hadn't noticed while all his attention was fixed on killing those men to prevent them from seeing his Arcans and reporting back to the rest of the patrol. He had to put his hands on his knees and take a moment to get his strength back, more than a little worried. He could have maintained a sphere ten times that size for a good five minutes, but that small sphere just covering the rifle and held for barely more than thirty seconds had sapped much of his strength. Either he hadn't even come close to recovering, or the arch had done far more damage than just turning some of his hair white.

The arch. Again, he cursed himself at his lack of foresight, that he failed to take what had happened into consideration. He knew that his spirit was going to bite him for his lack of wisdom the next time she came to him.

He had more than enough strength to chase down the men's horses, and after choosing the best of the five, he stripped the others of their saddles and gear and put the useful gear on the fifth. It was a very large, burly, strong-legged chestnut mare, with a glowing alchemical rune visible on its flank, the standard of the Flauren Army. Kyven removed that magical mark with a pat of his hand, draining away its magic, then pulled himself up into the saddle. "Sorry I couldn't let you go too, girl, but I'm going to need a horse while I get my strength back," he told her. "I apologize in advance for

how mean Vasha is going to be to you when she sees me riding you when we return to the others,” he added dryly, patting her on the base of the neck gently, then he pulled her reins to turn her.

Vasha was predictable, giving him a baleful look of almost violent jealousy when he rode up to the moving column of Arcans, then dismounted...and nearly fell down. He gripped the saddle as his knees buckled, which caused nearly half the column to surge towards him. “I’m alright,” he said dismissively as the first of them reached him, getting his legs back under him. He really wasn’t *that* tired, but the much softer look coming from Vasha told him that his deception had fooled his intended victim. “Take the gear from this horse, but don’t remove the saddle,” he ordered as he let go of the saddle. “Since Vasha’s carrying the arch, I’m going to have to ride it until we get back to the host.”

Ebony put her large clawed hands on his shoulders and looked into his eyes, looking down at him sternly. “What happened, Shaman?”

“I misdirected the patrol and killed the scouting team they sent in the direction we’re going,” he replied as Arcans quickly stripped the horse he’d ridden. “But it took a lot out of me. I’m not as recovered as I thought I was.”

She gave him a steady look. “At least you have the sense to admit that you’re not recovered,” she declared, letting go of him.

He looked to Vasha, then accepted a canteen offered to him by one of the scouts and took a drink. “I think we’re going to need another Equar, or maybe a Tauron,” he noted. “Something to carry the arch so I can ride Vasha.”

“Equars don’t usually live this far south,” Striker noted.

“I know, I might have to go north and hunt one down, then somehow convince it to move south and meet us in northern Flaur,” he replied. “I was thinking of finding a young colt to keep Vasha company,” he said, which made Ebony smile a bit.

“Thinking what Wilson was thinking?”

He nodded. “With a little work, Equars would be perfect mounts for an Arcan army,” he replied. “They’re the only mounts that could keep up with them when they’re on the move, and they’re certainly fearless enough to serve in an army. And if they were raised from birth with Arcans, they’d be much easier to handle.”

“The way Wilson tamed Strider.”

“Wilson didn’t entirely tame Strider,” Kyven chuckled as he pulled himself back onto the horse. “We don’t have time to hang around here,” he called. “Let’s get ready to move. If we push it, we can reach the main host just before noon.”

Kyven’s deception worked, for they ran into no resistance, and didn’t see another living soul on their way north. They did see several dead bodies and some destroyed farms, the crops torn up and the buildings burned down. They moved with steady speed all through the night, and once Kyven felt sturdy enough to move on his own, he stripped the saddle from the horse and set it free; given how far behind the front lines the horse was, there was no need to kill it...and Kyven was not in the mood to kill *anything* needlessly right now, not even a horse.

They sped up when the sun came up, since they were now visible from a distance to men on flitters or with spyglasses, and Orlann was a large enough city that there might be a few flitters there. Kyven used his Arcan form to keep up with the others, moving about as fast as they could on two legs and yet still moving faster than a human army on double time. The trail of the army became less apparent as they neared Orlann, as they started thinking about stealth, and almost right at noon, Kyven came out of a stand of trees and saw the Arcan army camped in a clearing, the tents pitched very close together to fit everyone into the meadow.

Kyven gave Clover and Dancer fond hugs when they hurried out to meet him. “My, you look handsome today,” Clover smiled. “Are you well?”

“Well enough to move,” he replied. “When did you get here?”

“At midnight. We’ve been resting the Arcans in preparation of what’s to come,” she replied.

“Good,” he nodded, then took Lucky’s hand when he and Lightfoot reached him.

“It’s good to see you well, Shaman,” Lucky said as Kyven gave Lightfoot a fond nuzzle.

“It’s good to be moving,” he answered. “Any trouble?”

“No,” Lightfoot replied brusquely.

“I saw that you were clearing as you moved. Did you range out or stay on the path?”

“We ranged out,” Dancer told him. “We destroyed every village within reach on our way north.”

“Good, so that means the army patrol I misdirected didn’t hit our own people when I sent them to Kiravi last night.”

“We destroyed Kiravi early yesterday afternoon,” Clover told him. “The ashes were probably only warm by the time the humans got there.”

“Good enough,” he said as the others filed into the camp. “Let’s get the Arcans settled in so they can rest. Track down Stalker and let’s meet in about an hour with the army’s leaders, so we can go over what’s going to happen.”

It was the type of dark and stormy night that so many bad novels referenced at their beginnings.

Kyven knelt near a pine tree at the edge of the woods with the lights of Orlann wavering in the distance, the steady, heavy rain causing them to shiver and shimmer in the darkness. The air was warm, heavy, almost

pregnant, filled with both humidity and large and warm falling raindrops. The sound of the rain muted the sounds of movement behind him, and then the entire city was illuminated in a bright flash from the heavens. It was a city of neat white-walled buildings with red tile or wooden shingle roofs, sealed with pine sap from the abundant pine trees that dominated southern Flaur. It was a city with dozens of streets laid out in a very neat, tidy, and orderly grid system, a city that hadn't grown up over itself to become a meandering, ramshackle collection of crooked streets and alleys like Old Avannar had become over time. It was a new city, a clean city, a city that depended on taking in food and products from the plantations and farms of southern Flaur and moving it northward overland.

It was a city of nearly 10,000 Flaurens, the largest city in southern Flaur, and it knew that it was going to be attacked.

Kyven lowered the spyglass that he'd been using to try to peer through the darkness, a slight frown on his face. The city had been fortified over the last three or four days, and the Flaurens had taken shocking, even drastic measures that told him that while the citizenry might not consider an Arcan rebellion to be all that dangerous, the army commanders that were leading the defense of the city *did*. They had gone around to all those neat and solidly built houses and buildings on the edges of the city and knocked them down to block the many streets that opened to the open land between the city and the pine forests, which had been cut back nearly a minar from the city's edges. The city had no walls, but those collapsed buildings created an effective ring of piled debris and rubble that would slow down anyone attempting to climb over it. The city had no heavy siege weaponry to speak of, but it did have five cannons in its garrison armory...five very old and not very powerful cannons. But still, cannons were cannons, and they'd emplaced them in a sheltered position just behind the debris pile ringing the town, an optimal position to fire on any Arcan group that tried to charge the city.

That showed that while the commanders thought that the Arcans were a threat, they didn't think they were *smart*. They'd arrayed their cannons in a direct line between where they expected them to come and the city, not

considering the possibility that the Arcan army might not attack from the same direction from which they marched.

Dancer had divined with magic to predict the night's weather, and the rain was going to be with them almost all night. After the storm passed, there was still some significantly steady and occasionally heavy rain behind it, and that changed things considerably. Most older muskets would not be able to be reloaded in this kind of rain, the powder, shot, or wadding would get wet before they got it into the barrel, which meant that his troops would only really get one shot per musket as they advanced. The defenders could reload their muskets from a sheltered position, which would give them an advantage. In this kind of rain, both shockrods and firetubes were not very useful, for different reasons. A shockrod used in a rainstorm electrocuted *everyone* in the immediate vicinity when used, including the user, where a firetube's heat and flame had to go through the rain and wet targets to inflict burns. A soaking wet target of a firetube could actually withstand a glancing hit from a firetube's cone without any significant injury, but not a direct or sustained hit. That collateral damage was part of why firetubes were so nasty, and in the rain, that potency was reduced. The rain would reduce the effectiveness of most of their alchemical weaponry, and limit the number of shots they'd have with their muskets. But, on the other side of things, the rain would reduce visibility in the darkness even more, conceal the moon to make things even darker, muffle sounds, and allow his Arcan troops to get very close to the debris piles before they were seen.

All of those elements were taken into account in the battle plan that had been drawn up.

"Ten minutes," he said quietly, and Stalker nodded and muttered under his breath, sending a magical message to Dancer and Clover.

"Ten minutes!" Ebony hissed behind him, turning around and waving her arm. That information was passed up and down the line of Arcans behind Kyven.

“Dancer reports her unit is in position,” Stalker announced. “Clover reports she will be in about two minutes.”

Kyven nodded as his nannies tightened up a little around him, and Sirra and Dauro inched up to the edge of the line, their glowing eyes narrowed and their every movement deliberate and subdued, the movements of a hunter stalking prey. Vasha’s hooves shifted on the ground behind them, and he heard the very faint clanking of the iron plates they’d hung off her shoulders and sides, armor to stop musket balls because she was such a huge and easily hit target. *Barding*, he remembered them calling it in the old books, armor for a knight’s warhorse. The weight of it wouldn’t slow her down in the slightest. She was going to need it, because Kyven, his monster friends, and the volunteers behind and around them were going to more or less charge into the jaws of the beast. They were the diversion, the first wave that would attack right where the humans expected and dominate their attention, and they would be facing the heaviest fire and the greatest risk of death. Kyven only allowed volunteers to undertake this very dangerous task, and he’d had nearly the entire army step forward when he asked for 200 brave Arcans willing to put their lives at great risk to give the other units a greater chance to succeed. And Kyven was leading that charge himself; he would not ask any Arcan to do anything that he would not also do himself.

“Go get into position, Stalker,” Kyven told his brother. “From here out, we follow the plan.”

“Alright. Good luck, brother,” he said, patting Kyven on the shoulder.

“You too, brother,” he nodded, and the large, black wolf Arcan melted into the darkness.

“I’d really rather prefer you be in your Arcan form, Shaman. It’s more suited for this,” Ebony said for the fifth time.

“I *want* them to single me out, Ebony,” he replied mildly, for the fifth time. “I’m much more conspicuous as a human than as an Arcan.”

She gave him a dark frown, but said nothing more, checking her Colt. Unlike the muskets, the Colts were designed to be useable in the rain, so those lucky few armed with them would have plenty of firepower available to them. Kyven slipped back and got a foot into the high stirrup of Vasha's saddle, then powered himself up. He sat there astride his saddle as the rain pounded down, as thunder rolled across the empty field between the edge of the woods and the murky lights of the city beyond, and he simply waited in grim silence.

"Three minutes," Ebony said, looking to the alchemical timepiece in her hand.

"Remember, everyone," he called in a hushed voice that still carried across the host, "you only get one shot, so make sure you make it count. This is about getting over the debris and engaging the defenders hand to hand, pushing them off the line, and drawing the other defenders to our position to force them to repel us. They have no idea that we're here, they think we're still another day away, so we will take them completely by surprise. We are the decoy, so let's make a lot of noise and draw a lot of attention," he reminded them. "Once you're over the wall and we clear out the initial defenders, we dig in as best we can and *make* them push us back over the pile. Everyone get ready to charge, but remember, we charge as *quietly* as we can. They can't see more than thirty minars in this even with their alchemical lamps, and if we're quiet enough, we'll get right on top of them before they can react."

"And that's why I want to kiss your feet for stealing all their alchemical night sight goggles," Striker chuckled quietly.

"I wasn't going to make things easy for them, Striker," Kyven said mildly, gripping Vasha's reins as she stepped up to the very front of the line, standing between two trees and with the open field before her.

"One minute!" Ebony called in a hushed voice, waving her arm. That was passed down the line, and his 200 Arcans tightened straps and prepared for the dash across that field. Vasha pranced a little bit in eager anticipation,

and the two Lupans at her feet tamped their paws on the wet, soggy pine needles covering the ground and hunched down.

“Now!” Ebony hissed. And without Kyven doing a thing, Vasha surged forward. In half a heartbeat, her hooves were pounding on the wet grass, carrying him and her iron plating as if they were nothing, accelerating to a speed that put the Arcans far behind her. Only the Lupans managed to keep up with her, loping easily just behind and to each side of her back legs, where Kyven had told them to stay. Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits at the point where he figured they would hear Vasha’s hooves. The entire world flared into brilliance to his eyes, the rain vanished, and what had been hazy, barely indistinguishable shadows flowing in a shimmering background became bright, clear, and sharp images to his eyes, as the microscopic life that covered most non-living objects highlighted them to his eyes, allowing him to see the eight rod high pile of debris in front of Vasha, with another inner pile of burlap sacks filled with grain, sand, and dirt built atop hastily erected wooden fortifications and parked wagons forming an elevated platform from which the defenders could fire their muskets over the debris pile and still have cover. There was some ten rods of open space between the back edge of the debris pile and the elevated platforms, showing that whoever their combat engineer was, he was actually pretty clever to set it up that way. The elevated platforms gave the defenders an extra few seconds to kill attackers, and since there were more men at the position than could fit on the platforms, they had men there to fight off anyone who got over the wall while the soldiers in firing positions could continue to fire with little interference.

But those advantages also brought a few vulnerabilities, a fact that the engineers much have understood and accepted as a reasonable risk; the benefits of being able to fire over the debris pile outweighed the liabilities of putting men in raised positions on hastily erected platforms. The platforms were vulnerable to being attacked *themselves*, having them knocked down, and that was *exactly* what Kyven intended to do. They were reinforced as best as they could, but no scaffold or platform was stronger than the posts that connected it to the ground.

Several angry buzzing sounds screamed by his ears as he saw muzzle flashes ahead of him, then he heard the booms of the muskets. They were trying to aim at his glowing eyes, but the darkness and his movement made it hard for them to draw a bead on him. He did hear one musket ball ricochet off the iron plate tied to Vasha's chest, and that made him *immediately* thankful Striker had thought of it. Vasha pounded her hooves right to the edge of the debris pile, about two rods over the head of a person of average height, then her powerful legs kicked off the ground. She sailed up and over the debris pile, her back legs clearing it by a good half a rod, and as Kyven came up and over and Vasha's body turned downward to land, he struck.

Not with Shaman magic, but with his shadow powers. The darkness around Kyven, which had seemed palpable from a distance, was clearly *unnatural* to the dozens of men that saw Vasha jump the debris, and it went from an amorphous aura around the Equar and rider to very long, thin, whip-like tendrils. Kyven slashed both arms towards himself, passing each other as if were hugging some invisible figure in front of him on the saddle, and that caused those two long tendrils to whip forward and curl back around towards each other so fast that the soldiers' eyes couldn't track it. Those whips of shadow were not insubstantial. They were solid, and they had tremendous force behind them when they struck the platform towards which Vasha was galloping once her hooves hit the ground. Two men were driven under those churning hooves, their screams cut unnaturally short as the massive animal crushed the life out of them as she rode them down, but the sound of their silenced screams was replaced by the loud crashing of wooden platforms and scaffolding having its foundation poles sheared through by Kyven's shadowy attack. Vasha put her head down and rammed the platform like a charging Tauron, and her sheer weight and the platform's lack of anchoring caused an entire section of it, some fifty rods long with Vasha at the center, to collapse.

Men screamed behind Kyven as the part of the platform Vasha hit was shattered, sending wood flying in every direction, and long lengths of it to each side groaned ominously and then snapped free of its moorings, then

toppled over backwards. Men tumbled to the ground along that fifty rod long section as Vasha began to slow and turn. One man that was on the ground dove to the side to avoid Vasha's hooves, rolled, and came up already shouldering his musket to shoot Kyven out of the saddle, but then his body snapped to the side so fast it almost looked as if he vanished in the darkness when Dauro hit him, his jaws closing on the man's arm and yanking him to the ground, carried along by the Lupan's momentum as Dauro slid to a halt. The man shrieked in agony, barely heard over the sound of tearing wood and musket shots, as the Lupan savaged him.

Kyven continued his display, using those tendrils of shadow to lift him up out of the saddle, then his entire body was surrounded by an inky blackness that swallowed all light, nearly as visible as a bright alchemical lamp in the stormy night for its impenetrable blackness. Every eye was locked on him...which allowed the Arcans behind him to climb to the top of the debris pile without challenge. The Arcans did as they were instructed, they stopped at the top of the pile and brought their muskets to bear, using their one shot to make it count, and it counted most when they were able to take careful aim at targets that weren't paying attention to them. The men on the platforms and on the rooftops behind the platforms were their targets, the men they couldn't easily reach. They fired almost simultaneously at the command of a sergeant, and dozens of men tumbled off the platforms that hadn't been collapsed or fell backwards out of sight on rooftops. The 200 Arcans then discarded their muskets and charged down the debris pile, their claws and bare pads giving them traction on the treacherous, wet slope, and they crashed into the startled defenders.

Kyven hovered above the short, ugly melee that erupted when the Arcans reached the defenders, being held aloft by tendrils of solid shadow, and he protected his fighters by laying into the men on the platforms that didn't collapse and on the rooftops, the men that the Arcans hadn't killed in their volley. Gunshots rang out under him as he used the tendrils like great, powerful whips, and protected himself by melding into the darkness he had created around him, making him invisible somewhere within the amorphous mass of moving, solid shadow. Kyven lashed out at any man that dared

come out of cover from the rooftops, grabbing them in tentacles of shadow and throwing them screaming high up and over the debris pile, to crash punishingly to the wet ground over a hundred rods away. When he killed off the last man on the rooftops, he attacked the men on the ground, who were fighting desperately against opponents who were stronger and faster than them. Men were impaled by lances of solid shadow, blasting out from the irregular mass of utter blackness that hung over the destroyed platforms, or they were ensnared and catapulted far out over the debris pile. There was a whole lot of shouting and confused calls from the defenders, who were uncertain and disoriented from Kyven's brazen assault, and that confusion was amplified by the storming of their position by Arcans. The humans fought without any organization whatsoever as the Arcans swarmed over their position, sporadic gunshots mixed in with screaming and shouting, and several humans managed to squirm out of the brawl and run off into the city...and Kyven intentionally allowed them to escape. Their reports would draw a counterattack by the humans, which would pull defenders away from their positions at other parts of the city and give the *real* attack much less resistance when they made their move.

The fight barely lasted five minutes before the 200 Arcans overwhelmed the confused and disorganized human defenders, and Kyven wasted no time. "Grab all their muskets! Pile anything you can get into the streets leading here! Fort up!" Kyven boomed from overhead, then he dropped down into Vasha's saddle. Vasha had blood all over her fanged maw, and her hooves were stained red, a red that was washing away in the rain. Sirra and Dauro slinked out of the shadows, also bloody from the fight, but none of it was their own. "They're gonna attack us as soon as those men get back to the other defenders!"

The Arcans moved with purpose and trained skill. They knew exactly what to do, and they executed the plan with calm speed, stacking anything solid in the streets leading to the little clearing where the platforms were built, creating makeshift barricades as others reloaded muskets picked up off the ground, doing so from sheltered positions under platforms or in the four buildings that opened into their position. Other Arcans invaded those

buildings, killed a few men hiding within, and took up positions on the rooftops themselves along with helpers who would reload muskets for them. Kyven rode around on Vasha, barking orders, pointing at things he wanted moved or changed, and ordering Arcans to carry their wounded and dead back over the debris pile and to the base camp. The dead were *not* going to be left in the city...and thankfully, they had only suffered 11 dead and 38 wounded in the assault. Kyven's distraction had allowed the Arcans to engage the defenders without having to charge in through a volley of musket fire, and once they were within arm's reach, the Arcans had the advantage.

Their haste paid off. Just as the last barricade was erected, giving his Arcans both cover and firing positions, a large force of humans appeared at the end of the widest street leading to their clearing, which was one of the many small parks around the edge of the city where caravans assembled for their trips north. The Arcans lined up along the barricades with reloaded muskets as the humans formed up to attack the barricade.

Kyven was waiting for that.

He climbed up onto Vasha's saddle and then jumped, jumped into a barely visible circle of shadow, and moved into the shadow world. He took a single step in the chaotic landscape—he wasn't hidden behind his shadow form—and reached the cannons. With an expansive gesture of both hands, he formed a very large circle of shadow around three of the five cannons, as well as some ten men that were tending them and some of their supplies, kegs of powder and stacked cannonballs. They all fell into the gateway, barely went an inch within the shadow world before going through another shadowy gateway, and reappeared in the real world...about 300 rods directly above where those men were forming up.

They never saw it coming in the darkness, and the rain's pounding made it hard for the men below to hear the screams of the men falling from above. Kyven watched with satisfaction as those three cannons crashed directly into the center of that formation, sending body parts and blood and dirt and pieces of stone flying in every direction, and then there was a

muffled explosion as the impact made one of the loaded cannons go off. The cannonball got jammed in the bent barrel of the cannon, and the entire thing exploded in a fiery eruption of red-hot shards of metal shrapnel. Another cannon landed on the building beside the street, collapsing half of it and sending the debris crashing onto the men beside it. Dozens died from the impact of the cannons and the falling men and wooden kegs and cannonballs, and dozens more died in the explosion, causing the survivors to scatter and the wounded to leave smeared trails of blood on the ground as they staggered or crawled away.

He dropped back into the real world beside one of the corporals on a rooftop, who barely flinched at his sudden appearance. “Did you do that, Shaman?” the small yet powerfully built canine asked.

“That was me, Tracker,” he replied.

The short canine laughed. “How did you make the cannons fall out of the sky?”

“I’ll explain it some other time,” he replied. “Any other concentrations of men?”

“None yet, but we can see some movement further back,” he replied.

“Keep us on the ground informed, you men and women are our eyes,” he said, forming a shadow gateway directly under himself, then opting to fall through it rather than move the gateway up his body. He used that momentum in the shadow world to let him open another gateway and drop out of the shadows and back into Vasha’s saddle.

Kyven’s unorthodox attack bought them nearly ten minutes of additional time to fortify, but it also brought a whole lot of attention from the *things*, who had been attracted by so much real-world material moving through the shadow world, sending out ripples of distortion that brought them directly to his position. There were nearly a dozen of them lurking behind the shadows, waiting patiently to see if anything or anyone else would enter their domain, making it unsafe for Kyven to shadow walk

unless he was concealed by his shadow form. By the time the humans had another detachment of men formed up to attack them, this group on another street and back so far that only an Arcan was going to see them, Kyven got his Arcans in position behind their barricades and blinds. “Remember, we hold this position as long as possible!” he boomed to them, holding up his rifle. “Get every musket you can find loaded and stored so water won’t get in the barrel! Keep the spares close at hand, we’ll be using every shot! Every minute we hold this position is another Arcan life saved!” The rain started to slack off, but the lightning intensified, creating bright fleeting glimpses of the small park and the many human bodies strewn on the ground, most of them hastily looted of their powder, shot, and knives. Kyven took up a position at one of the barricades with Vasha around the corner of the small shop beside it and the Lupans lurking just beside her, aiming his rifle down the street and waiting patiently.

“Why aren’t they attacking?” a young ferret asked beside him, gripping his looted musket in nervous fingers.

“They’re thinking over what I did with the cannons, they don’t want me to drop a house on them next,” he replied calmly, peering through the buildings with spirit sight, watching them start to gather up. “When they move, they’ll try to get into the buildings so they can fire on us from the windows,” he called loudly.

“Could you actually do that?” the ferret asked.

Kyven glanced at him. “If it wasn’t anchored to the ground...maybe,” he replied. “But I have another trick I’ve been saving for this, and I’ll be using it once they commit and attack in force. We have to draw as many of them to us as possible to give the others a chance to get past the barricades with minimum resistance, so our job is to make lots of noise and make them think this is where we’re coming in,” he reminded the young male. “And I can make *lots* of noise when it’s needful.”

The ferret laughed. “I don’t doubt it, Shaman,” he affirmed.

They only had to wait a few more moments for the defenders to decide what to do. They formed up around the corner from a building and four blocks down, in another of the many small open parks that the merchants used to stage their wagons, nearly two hundred men armed with muskets and knives and swords for close quarters fighting. They were barely visible to Kyven through all the buildings, their bright life energy masked by several buildings' worth of faint glow given off by the microscopic life coating their walls.

“Almost,” Kyven called, raising his hand. When the men started to move, he waved it back and forth. “Here they come!”

The Arcans had enough experience in fighting to know not to waste their shots. They could see the charging humans in the distance, their Arcans eyes gave them visual acuity even in the moonless night, but they held off on firing until the humans were two blocks away. Kyven opened up the firing, felling a man with his rifle, and then a cascade of musket shots mixed in with the distant thunder from a lightning strike. The charge at them wilted and faltered, men tripping over the wounded as they fell, but they got within one block and responded, firing on the move. The shots went wild, all over the place, but there were enough shots to make the Arcans take cover...at least most of them. Kyven saw three Arcans tumble back from the barricade, those who hadn't moved fast enough, who were immediately dragged back and away from the firing line. The men ahead, mostly civilian militia with a few red-coated Flauren soldiers mixed in, started lunging for the doors of the buildings lining the street, trying to get inside and out of view. Kyven looked up to the buildings to each side of them and waved his hands quickly, a pre-arranged signal to the Arcans in those buildings in firing positions, who had not engaged to conceal their positions. They were the best shots, and their job was to use their night sight to shoot the humans shooting from those windows.

The Arcans held the barricade for well over ten minutes, as men fired at them from around corners of buildings, behind an overturned wagon a block and a half up the street, and from the windows. His Arcans held their ground, the reserves reloading the muskets from concealed and covered

positions to keep the powder dry as runners brought loaded muskets up to the line, and that organized sustained fire kept the humans pinned down, prevented them from reaching the barricade. Kyven drew the most fire because of his glowing eyes, and that was exactly what he wanted. Every time he heard them shout “Shaman!” he knew that he was doing his job.

But the humans had more than just muskets. Kyven saw two men behind the wagon skitter forward and move as if they threw something, and he saw the black crystals in those devices rise up and hurtle towards them... annihilators! Kyven reacted immediately, dropping his rifle and gathering the murky shadows all around him, concentrating them, then lashing out with them. Those two eruptions of lancing shadow were solid, and Kyven guided them unerringly to intercept those annihilators before they could land close enough to the barricade to disintegrate both the wooden barrier they'd erected and the Arcans defending it. The two annihilators met Kyven's lances of shadow and were rebounded backwards and downwards, both of them hitting the street and immediately firing—they must have been set to discharge on hitting a solid object. Neither annihilator killed a human, but they eradicated the side of one of the shops along the side of the street, disintegrating not only its walls, but its support beams and foundational support. The building groaned, leaned, and then the sound of tearing and snapping wood mixed with another distant thunderclap as the building collapsed into the street, which helped the Arcans by further blocking the street and choking down the street to a narrow point that the humans had to pass to reach them.

“Over there!” Kyven barked, pointing to the other side of the little park, to the other street that accessed it. He saw another group of humans moving to use that street, as well as seeing many humans moving singly or in pairs, slinking along between the buildings in the middle of the block to try to get close enough. He also saw men moving in from the edges of the debris piles, along the defensive line they'd set up and the Arcans had blocked with barricades. The humans were advancing on them from all three sides, and much as they were the diversion for the rest of the Arcans, the men attacking from the interior of the city were trying to divert the

Arcans, give the men approaching from the flanks an unresisted chance to get into position to attack. Kyven's voice boomed as he realigned his volunteers to defend at all barricades, concentrating them on the flanks and only leaving eight Arcans at each barricade blocking the streets.

It was time.

"Hold this position as long as possible, Goldeyes," he ordered his sergeant. "When the time comes, pull the Arcans back to the treeline if you need to."

"The debris won't make that easy, Shaman," he warned.

"I'll take care of that," he replied. "Here, use it well," he said, handing his tawny cat Arcan his bolt-action rifle. Goldeyes nodded, took it, and took a few steps back as Kyven began to breathe deeply, clearly about to use his Shaman magic, then he turned and barked commands to the Arcans as musket fire from outside their position started to chatter.

Kyven spread his feet a little and opened up all of his senses...not to the power of the spirits, but to the dark, cool, flowing sensation of the shadows. He felt every shadow around him, felt how they moved in the weak light sources, how they flowed...fluid, shifting, mutable. The shadows were the border of light and dark, containing both yet part of neither, and the shadow *was* illusion. It hinted at what truth lurked within it, it concealed, it deceived, it tricked. He became aware of every shadow around him, *felt* them, felt their darkness and felt their cool fingers spread over the walls, over the ground, gather and become strong in the sheltered nooks and corners, felt them overlap one another. He felt the shadow world behind it, a shadow of a shadow that was everywhere at once, and yet did not exist.

Fully attuned to the shadows, fully connected to them, Kyven raised his hands slowly. The Arcans watched in surprise as the shadows on the ground, on the walls, they all shivered, twisted, and then they flowed towards the Shaman, gathering around him, swirling, shifting, making his body hard to see except for his glowing green eyes. They watched as his

body *dissolved* into those shadows, shimmering into invisibility, leaving only those eyes within the shimmering mass of shifting darkness.

They saw those glowing eyes lift up from the ground, well above the level of the rooftops, then they all gasped and flinched and several screamed when the piled debris behind their position *exploded*. They barely saw the massive blur of shadow smash it as if some giant had swung a club underhanded at the debris, sending pieces of wood and thatch and stone flying out into the field beyond the town. The shadowy mass struck it again, then again, systematically clearing a wide divot from the debris nearly fifteen rods across, which was more than wide enough for the Arcans to retreat if necessary. That done, the Arcans saw the shifting, amorphous mass of darkness rise up even more and then start moving, moving into the city.

Kyven advanced up to the nearest clearing, filled with men preparing to advance, and he laid into them with immediate and unmerciful resolve. Men screamed as bodies and muskets went flying, confused shouting ensued as the men struggled to identify what was attacking them, and after barely seconds, the survivors scattered from the clearing when half their number were smashed to the ground and struck and sent flying as if hit by a giant club. Once he had a clear area with which to work, Kyven formed a detailed image in his mind and then beseeched the shadow fox for the energy to bring his vision into the real world. She responded with surprised and approving swiftness, for she could see the intent in his mind and thought and was pleased by his idea.

It was a tactic he had used several times before, so he had the experience to make it impressive. The ground began to shake around the clearing, and the smell of sulphur and brimstone filled the rain-choked air as fire erupted from the ground. It quickly spread into a circle of searing flames that shot up over the rooftops, then it filled the circle. A mighty roar erupted from the center of that pool of flame, then a giant clawed hand thrust upwards from it. The men immediately around the clearing gaped in horror as something from their darkest nightmares climbed out of that pool of fire, some giant bipedal *thing* with goat horns, a dog's muzzle, and

cloven hooves on its feet, which had licks of flame dancing around them, scorching the ground upon which they rested when the thirty rod tall behemoth stepped free of the pool of fire and spread giant, bat-like wings and roared again, turning its muzzled head to the heavens as its long tail, hairless and tipped with a tuft of fur encircling a bony spear-pointed tip.

“BY THE NINE LAKES OF HELLFIRE, I AM UNLEASHED!” the giant creature boomed, its voice shaking the buildings. **“COME, MORTALS, I HUNGER FOR YOUR SOULS!”**

“It’s just an illusion!” one of the men barked. “Remember the briefing, men! One of the Shaman can make things appear that aren’t real! It can’t—*urk!*” the Flauren soldier gurgled as the creature’s clawed hand grabbed him around the middle and picked him up, bringing him up to meet its glowing red eyes.

“OH, SO I AM NOT REAL TO YOU, MORTAL?” it asked with amused venom in its voice. **“YOUR SOUL IS MINE NOW!”**

Within his illusion and his shadows, a bone-weary Kyven met the eyes of the soldier—though the soldier couldn’t see his eyes in return—and cast the strength-draining spell, channeling it *through* the shadows, through his illusion. He opened himself up completely to the spell, which caused it to drain every iota of strength and energy out of the soldier so quickly that the man didn’t even have time to scream. He died in seconds, robbed of the strength to even keep his heart beating, as his body emaciated in the illusion’s grasp and his skin turned gray. The man’s eyes filmed over with a whiteness that consumed the pupils and iris, and the horrified look of shock and agony on the man’s face became locked into a hideous rictus. The illusion tossed the wasted body to the ground, where it bounced bonelessly and rolled to a stop, several men staring at the death mask on the body’s face and their eyes widening in horror.

The stolen life bolstered Kyven, who had exhausted himself creating his large, detailed illusion, which was nothing but a costume worn over the shadows he had gathered around himself. He had filled the illusion with his

shadows, and that allowed his illusion which he had *not* instilled with enough substance to interact with the real world to do just that, because it was nothing but a costume worn by the solid shadows beneath it, which *could* interact with the real world. So when the illusion clasped its two clawed hands together and brought them down on the roof of the closest building, that roof shattered from the impact, sending red tiles and splinters of wood flying in every direction.

And that did it. The organization of the men degenerated into total chaos as Kyven's shadow-infused illusion wreaked havoc, smashing buildings in a seemingly random pattern that actually blocked off the two streets that would allow the defenders to reach his Arcans. Kyven crushed and swatted fleeing men wherever he could reach them, and when he couldn't, he destroyed buildings—empty buildings, since the Flaurens had placed all their civilians in the center of the city, where it was safest. Whenever he felt his strength flagging, used up maintaining the large, detailed illusion, he captured an enemy human and drained his strength, and that kept him going long after he would have passed out trying to maintain an illusion of that size for that long, even if he wasn't already exhausted by using the arch.

The humans did finally organize some semblance of a response to him. A Flauren officer led a group of red-coated soldiers to him, they formed a hasty firing line, and they loosed a volley of musket balls at him. Kyven had the illusion bark out a scornful laugh after the smoke cleared, since the illusion couldn't be harmed and Kyven was protected within it by the solid layers of shadows surrounding him, which had made the musket balls bounce harmlessly off of the surface of the shadow, where it filled the illusion. To the men shooting at him, it was as if the musket balls were just bouncing off the hide of the giant beast, but Kyven caused bleeding wounds to appear on the illusion, because they had to *believe* they could stop his illusion. If they thought it was invincible, they would flee from it rather than converge on it, and that would get Arcans killed where the true attack was going to take place. Kyven's job was to draw as many soldiers as possible to his location, and one way to do it was to force them to devote

large numbers of men to taking down a giant, rampaging beast. By disrupting the men already here he protected his own, and by forcing the Flaurens to respond in force, he protected the main attack force.

And force was brought to bear. Kyven saw a large contingent of men rushing towards his location, and he also saw the two cannons he hadn't dropped being hastily pulled into a position to fire on him. Kyven smashed another building, then moved directly into the small park and looked to square off against a large formation of men that came around a turn in the street and rushed towards him. Kyven eased back from the shadows, made them intangible everywhere but directly around his body, forming a solid shield of shadow protecting him while the rest of the shadows filling the illusion were once again without substance. It was a move to save his strength, which was ebbing quickly from maintaining the illusion *and* controlling the shadows. The men lined up quickly and raised their muskets in the drizzling rain and darkness, and at the command of their officer, they fired in unison. Kyven felt musket balls bounce off his solid shadows, his shield of darkness protecting his body—an idea he got from the repellers—and caused his illusion to stagger back with a roar of pain and fury, a dozen or more new wounds appearing on the upper legs, torso, and arms of his illusory creation. The line of men knelt down and allowed the second rank to raise their muskets in unison, the officer shouting for the men to hold the line as Kyven charged his illusion towards them. They fired in unison, but Kyven didn't add any more wounds to the illusion, too intent and too busy to make any changes to it because he was moving too fast. The men started to scatter as he approached them, and he raised the illusion's huge hand to swipe at the formation—

A stunning strike hit him from the side, something hit his illusion with so much power that he blacked out for a short second. He became aware again just in time to feel himself falling, and feel the shadows around him evaporate into the muggy night air. He dimly heard the boom of a cannon, and even in his semi-dazed state, he realized that they'd not only managed to get one of the two remaining cannons into a position to use it against him, the gunnery crew had managed to hit a moving target using a

cannon...that was some *skill*. “It’s a Shaman!” he heard someone shout in Flauren. “It was a trick of magic, the beast wasn’t real!” All he could really focus upon was the ground, which was spinning like a top and hurtling toward him, so fast that he reacted more out of instinct than any rational reasoning.

The men saw a dark pool of liquid night swirl into being on the ground under the Shaman, and he fell into it, vanishing into thin air!

In the weightlessness of the shadow world, Kyven fought through the loud ringing in his ears and the wet cotton pressing down on his mind as he drifted in the swirling chaos, drifted without actually moving. The first thing he sensed was the *things*, and the first rational thought he had was that he was unhidden, and since they were already close, already attracted to his location from him dropping the cannons, then they were in a position to attack. He put solid nothingness under his feet, arresting his motionless momentum and providing him a point of reference from which to align the swirling, shifting chaos before his eyes, and he dropped to one knee on his chosen ground even as he thrust his arms out, enacting his power to control shadows on a direct level against the entire world around him, freezing *everything* around him as if it was trapped between the ticking of a clock’s second hand, trapped in time...in a place where time had no meaning.

The first coherent thing he made out as he slowly regained his senses, as the ringing in his ears abated, was a needle-pointed tentacle-like appendage barely two fingertips’ width from his face.

Twenty *things* were clustered around him, amorphous and undefined, but to Kyven’s senses, they were as separate from the world around him as they were from him. He didn’t push them back, not confident in his faculties quite yet to do anything more than hold everything in place. He held them in stasis as he slowly felt the ringing ease, as his other senses began to clear—though that was hard to be sure of when most of his senses were being assaulted by the random chaos of the shadow world around him. He stood up on steady legs after a long moment, when in the real world the

soldiers he had confronted were advancing towards the smashed debris of the buildings he'd knocked down to block the streets leading to his Arcans.

Twenty...he realized that he'd never seen that many *things* gathered together before. He cast his senses deep into the shadow world and sensed others, others moving his direction, and after counting them, he realized that there were *more* of them now, six more. Where had the six new ones come from? Had Toby or Nightfall dragged men into the shadow world and allowed the *things* to kill them, specifically against Kyven's instructions? Or were these new *things* ones that had customarily been so far away from him that he'd never sensed them before, and Kyven and the other shadow walkers' activities drawing them to them?

Kyven infused his being with shadow, causing his body to vanish into the undulating chaos, to become part of it, and that made the entire world around him shudder, contort, and then snap into smooth order in a split second. The nausea-inducing broiling of the shadow world untwisted itself into a dark representation of the real world around him, where he stood on a street between two buildings as Flauren soldiers and militiamen jogged down the street around him, and even *through* him, on their way to his unit's position. The twenty *things* around him shimmered with the shadow world as he forced them into their original forms, and he was then surrounded by twenty men and women wearing common garb....

Except for two *things* wearing the coats of Flauren soldiers, the color bled out of them by the shadow, but the cut and appearance of those uniform jackets were unmistakable.

They *were* new to this place, Kyven realized. Somehow, just over the last few minutes, something Kyven had done or something had happened that had caused these two Flauren soldiers to be pulled into the shadow world...how, Kyven wasn't sure. Kyven hadn't put any shadow portal in a place or position where someone else might have snuck through before he closed it, and then somehow managed to vanish into the shadow world without him sensing them. Living things and solid objects were a beacon of disharmony that disrupted the nature of this world at a fundamental level,

and now that Kyven was much more in touch with this place, he could sense that disharmony just like the *things* could. He would have known if some soldier had fallen into one of his entrances into the shadow world. No, these two had to come into this place some other way, some way he didn't know of or understand.

The shadow fox had told him that his knowledge of his place would be his greatest defense against it, and this proved that he still had much to learn about this dangerous little segment of the world as a whole. This dark closet built into the house that was reality still had its secrets, and when he had time, he had to investigate this to try to understand how it happened.

Kyven held the *things* locked in paralysis as he took a single short step *down*, getting some distance from most of them, then enacted a gateway back into the real world under his feet. He pulled the disc up and over his body even as he willed himself to fall into it, and that made him drop out of thin air and to the ground just beside Goldeyes, dropping to one knee and one hand as he panted heavily.

“Shaman!” Goldeyes called in concern, helping him up. “Are you alright?”

“Just tired,” he replied. “They hit me with a *cannonball*.”

“We heard the cannons fire,” he said as Ebony, Striker, and Fastpaw quickly converged around him.

“I left those two out on purpose, I should have been paying more attention,” he said with a dry, weary voice. “Where do we stand, Ebony?”

“We hold the position,” she replied. “Your illusion made all the humans pull back, probably out of fear. If the others are on schedule, they should be attacking any moment.”

“Good. We hold this position until they either push us out or they give us the signal.”

The respite didn't last long. Sporadic firing erupted from the far side of their position, then Arcans rushed to that side and lined up behind the barricades. Musket balls whizzed over the barricades as humans advanced on the barricade, and when Kyven joined them, he saw that nearly 300 men had gotten over the makeshift blockade Kyven had made when he knocked the building down further up the street, and they were advancing the smart way, moving in groups but staying under cover, darting from covered position to covered position. Kyven rose up from a void in the barricade that was only chest high, a firing position, and unloaded both of his Colts down the street in a blitz of fire, not aiming at much of anything so much as forcing the humans to take cover, then he slid back out of view before they could respond. The rain slowed to a stop quickly as Kyven reloaded, and he looked up at the sky and saw a few ragged holes in the cloud cover above. The storm was breaking up faster than Dancer anticipated. No rain meant that the Arcans could reload without being in a sheltered place, but it would give the humans the same ability and would also make it easier for them to see. There were still some flashes of lighting to the west and to the east, hinting that it might pick back up again, but for the immediate future, the rain was over.

They were outnumbered, but their fortified position made it very hard for the humans to rout them, even when the defenders started attacking from all sides. The humans coming in along the edges of the fortifications pressed from the flanks while the others attacked from the two streets. Goldeyes flinched back when a bullet tore the wood just by his head, shaking his head and pawing at his face. When he looked back, Kyven saw a gash in his fur, bleeding down the side of his cheek. "Careful," Kyven said, then he whipped out and fired off a flurry of shots before pulling back. Others weren't so careful, or so lucky, however. There were two still Arcan bodies laying on the ground just behind them along the barricade, and there were others laying on the ground, those who had died since Kyven ordered the evacuation of the wounded and dead.

An explosion made all of them flinch. Kyven looked to the side and saw the barricade they'd built gone, pieces of wood and bloody body parts

still flying through the air. “What in the spirits?” Goldeyes called, but Kyven could see through the smoke and realized that the humans had somehow blown up the barricade...some kind of bomb or grenade, or something he had missed? He saw no crystals anywhere near them that weren't being carried by the Arcans. Arcans rushed towards the breach as they heard men screaming over the echoing sound of the explosion, and Kyven moved to join them. He ran towards the breach with Ebony and Striker behind him, Fastpaw converging from the far side, and they could all see a large number of men charging towards the hole they'd opened in the defenses.

Kyven reacted first. He brazenly slid to a stop right in line with the men, in a position where they could have shot him, but the humans couldn't see anything in the smoky darkness and the low-hanging acrid haze concealed his glowing eyes. In seconds, shadows rose up from the ground like a fast-moving mist, coalescing and converging around Kyven, swirling around him like a slow-moving whirlpool. The shadows stopped moving and quickly converged around his body, then he thrust out both hands and did a trick the *things* were fond of using. Slender spears of pure shadow lanced away from him, and men rushing towards the breach shrieked in agony when they were impaled by them. The shadow lances kept right on going after impaling a man, as Kyven extended them as far as he could, killing nearly a dozen men, multiple men impaled by the same lance as it sliced through the air and through men on its way down the opening. The men Kyven didn't hit didn't charge forward, they instead scattered to each side and took cover behind anything laying on the ground, to get out of his line of sight—no, they were taking cover for another reason. Kyven saw a man on the edge of the platform scaffold light something that started to spark and smoke—a fuse—and he realized that was how they did it, and what they were about to do. Gunpowder bombs thrown from the parts of the platform that Kyven didn't collapse, up high so the thrower could get more distance from his effort. Kyven snapped both his pistols out of their holsters and unloaded on that bomb thrower. Several shots hit him, making him stagger back and drop the bomb onto the ground just beside his platform, which then rolled underneath it.

“Down!” Kyven barked as he dove aside and to the ground, rolling up behind an overturned wagon. His nannies copied his movement, and just in time, because an even louder and larger explosion rocked the ground under them, pushed the overturned wagon nearly a rod along the ground from the sheer force the blast released. A man’s arm landed just to the side of him as he rolled over onto his belly, torn off at the shoulder from the explosive force.

“They’re getting serious about dislodging us, Shaman,” Striker said with his usual dry wit.

“Just a little bit,” Kyven agreed. He was about to say something else, but two red balls of light streaked into the sky over the city, and then a third one joined them a moment later. That was the signal that the others had engaged. “The others are making their move,” he noted. He stood up and looked to both sides, waving his arm up and down, getting their attention. His sergeants and corporals started barking commands, and every Arcan with a firetube took it out and started using it. Searing cones of fire lit the darkness all around the park as the Arcans used the firetubes to flash-dry the wet surrounding the small park, and then those buildings caught fire. Two more Arcans carried up casks of oil, which they threw over the barricade on the far side and through the hole in the barricade on the near side, then the oil spreading across the grass and cobblestones was lit on fire, covering the two flanks approaching their position with flame. The Arcans gathered quickly near the breach as more oil casks were broken on the ground of the park behind them, then the oil was lit on fire. “Go, go, go, go!” Kyven barked, pushing Arcans back through the breach, where they dashed back towards the forest. Their initial job was done, and now they would circle around and reinforce Stalker’s Arcans as they pushed into the city from the west, rather than try to push through all the defenders that had converged on them to push them out. They were the decoy, and now the men that had been trying to beat them back were going to realize it. They would rush to the western breach, the closest one, and there they would encounter Kyven’s Arcans once again, this time being the defenders as they held Stalker’s flank as his troops invaded the city. Kyven vaulted up and got

onto Vasha's back, and he led his Arcans on their wide swing around town, circling out of visual and musket range as the Lupans ran at Vasha's hooves and the Arcans ran behind him, moving as fast as a horse. They heard almost constant gunfire and several explosions in town as they circled it, then came up on several Arcans carrying wounded back towards the host. It was there that Kyven turned Vasha back towards the city, then she again charged towards the ringed pile of debris that served as the city's makeshift wall. Just as he had done, Striker had cleared a hole through the debris for his Arcans to easily enter, and when Kyven rode through it, he came up on a rear defensive position where muskets were being loaded by younger Arcans and wounded were being tended.

"How far in are they?" Kyven asked the closest Arcan.

"Five blocks, Shaman, the humans are putting up a lot of resistance," came the answer from a young female ferret who was tying a bandage around the leg of a very large, burly bull Arcan, his horns cut off close to their bases.

"Ebony, get our troops up to help Stalker," he said as he dismounted. "Vasha, Sirra, Dauro, stay here and defend this position against the humans," he told his three monster companions. "You can't follow me where I'm going."

"What are you going to do, Shaman?"

"What I can, from the best place I can do it," he replied as his form slowly infused with shadow, turning him into a silhouette in the night backlit by alchemical lights ringing the position. "Tell Stalker I'll take out the command structure, now that we don't need them to give the orders we want them to give anymore. After that, I'll just range around town and put a hand in wherever it looks like I'm needed."

"I will," Ebony said as a circle of darkness swirled into being around Kyven's feet.

Kyven made an impact in the battle within ten minutes of entering the shadow world, when he tracked down and killed the entire Flauren command staff, a Major and five officers working from the town hall at the very center of Orlann, and he continued to make a difference because he took complete command of the rooftops. He came out of the shadow world right behind four men set up in a very good position overlooking the main street leading through town, the path that Clover's forces would be taking. Three of them were gunners, but the fourth was using two flags to signal positions on other rooftops, a very efficient system to send orders all over town quickly, Kyven noted. He killed them with spears of shadow before they even knew he was there, killing them with silent efficiency. He then moved from rooftop to rooftop supported by the shadows, hidden in the center of his dark tentacle-writhing mass because he was in his shadow form, a dark, wraith, a ghost that moved from rooftop to rooftop and killed every human he encountered. He came up behind them, from the center of town towards the edges, so they never even saw his dark shadows shimmering in the muggy night. Their attention was focused on the streets below, not the air above and behind them. He worked his way around the rooftops around the center of town in a spiral pattern, killing the four-man shooting positions he found, set up so at least one firing position had a line of fire on just about every street corner, and the strategically important corners had three or four positions with a line of fire on it.

After clearing out the rooftop firing positions, Kyven did what he did best, and that was spy. Over the course of the muggy, wet night, Kyven kept an eye on the town from both above, suspended in midair by the shadows with shadowy tentacles over thirty rods long moving along the rooftops, and also from the shadow world when he had need to cross the city quickly. He kept his three Shaman brethren informed of every large-scale movement of the Flauren defenders, which made it impossible for them to mount any kind of counterattack. Any time more than twenty men moved anywhere, the Arcans were told of it, and that was absolutely devastating to the Flaurens. Every large group of men that moved found themselves being ambushed by Arcans wielding muskets that knew exactly where they were and exactly when to open up on them to inflict maximum damage. Kyven

joined those attacks when he felt he was needed, but more often than not, he lurked in the shadows and kept a very close eye on everything their opponents did, which made it very easy for the Arcan army to overwhelm the Flauren defenders.

Over the course of two hours, the Arcans broke the organized defense of Orlann, and turned the Flaurens into pockets of isolated, disorganized resistance. They had no overall command, since Kyven had killed their officers, and any attempt to reinforce any position close to the fluid front lines was decimated by Arcans ambushers sent out to break them up. The battle degenerated from humans holding strategic, fortified defensive positions at critically important parts of town to house to house fighting, as the Arcans overwhelmed those positions and pushed the defenders back into the heart of the city, pushed them out of the streets and into the houses as the only defensive positions they could hold.

As the Arcans pushed into the center of town, Kyven showed his three Shaman friends a map of the town's core, an illusion hanging in the air against the wall of an inn. Dead human bodies littered the street, and not all of them were soldiers. The center of town was where all the civilians were being held, and the Arcans had started encountering noncombatant old men, women, and children. They had very strict orders about that; if it moves and it's not an Arcan, shoot it. The Arcans had already started pulling enslaved Arcans out of some of the buildings, as well as finding corpses of collared Arcans, killed by their masters before they could release them. Kyven hated to see that, but he knew that it was going to start happening.

“Most of the resistance is around town hall,” Kyven said, causing red blocks of light to blink on the map in the buildings as the distant sound of musket fire echoed faintly off the walls, mixing with the sound of crickets nearby to produce an eerie nocturnal harmony of relaxed death. “Without any organization or leadership, each group of men is acting independently, which makes them very easy to eliminate.”

“Yes, the blockades and barricades were very easy to take,” Stalker agreed, his eyes bright and his voice excited, animated, from having the

chance to kill so many humans.

“There’s only about a hundred fighting men left,” Kyven continued. “But there are also a lot of women and young boys starting to show up with those men with muskets, and they’re fighting.”

“They only delay the inevitable,” Dancer said with a sigh.

“I know, but they know that they’re in this to the end,” Kyven said grimly. “No doubt they’ve seen that we’re shooting at *all* of them, so there’s no reason for them *not* to fight. A mouse will fight a wolf when it knows it’s going to die if it doesn’t,” he said, patting Sirra on the flank as padded up to him, then sat down.

“We should contain them in the town center and sack the outlying parts of town for supplies,” Dancer said, to which Kyven nodded.

“I already sent orders out to the skirmishers holding the parts of town we’ve taken to start sacking. We should start seeing the fires soon. I told them not to burn the buildings along the northern main street until last, so we can withdraw without having to dodge burning debris falling on us and burn them on our way out.”

“Ever wise,” Clover chuckled softly, rubbing tenderly at a bloody gash on her cheek. She’d been burned by a musket ball...which would have killed her if she’d stuck her head out even half a rod more. A pale moonbeam slid over them as the clouds overhead continued to race at high speed, and to the west was relatively open sky. The rain was all but over, which was letting the town dry out a little bit...just enough for them to burn it to the ground.

“I told the skirmishers to focus mainly on freeing any living Arcans they find.” They all looked up to see a red light streak up into the sky, and Kyven chuckled. “And Lightfoot is more or less right on schedule,” he said. That light was a signal from Lightfoot that she had completed her task, which was to circle the main host around Orlann and get them on the north side, camping them in a large grassy pasture in the pine forest that used to

be a plantation. Like in the Green Valley, those cleared farms stayed open after the farmers died or moved away, which gave them a good place to camp while waiting for the fighting Arcans to finish their task.

Since their eyes were up, Kyven wasn't the only one to see a life-illuminated shape, small and distant, rise up from just behind town hall and then quickly rush to the north. "What? Where the hell did they get a *flitter*?" he snapped, just barely making out the shape of the small flying device and the life-light of the pilot as it rushed to the north. "I never saw it in their armory!"

"It might have been someone's personal flitter, brother," Dancer noted. "Do we pursue? One of us could catch up to it and bring it down."

Kyven grunted as he peered into the darkness. "No, I *want* them to know we destroyed Orlann. It's moving north, and it looks like it's on a line to go straight to Tallasar. But if it comes back, we'll bring it down. And I think I'll be keeping an eye out for flitters that might try to scout out our army," he said darkly.

"But it does warn us to move quickly. We need to be away from here by sunrise," Stalker cautioned.

Kyven nodded. "Let's finish this. Sister, send out more skirmishers to sack and set fire to every building not on our withdraw route," he told Dancer, who nodded. "Clover, send word to Lightfoot to have her send out the porters to start carrying out what we take, and secure the northern road so they can do it safely. Have them focus on getting the Arcans we freed back to the camp, that's our priority. Brother, let's finish off the last of the defenders quickly."

"Let's just set fire to the buildings they're holed up in, then kill anything that comes out," Stalker offered.

"We're going to burn it anyway, and we can afford to lose what's in them," he agreed with a nod. "Tell the fighters that they can start allowing

children and *only* children to escape, and to push them south or east,” he added. “But any child carrying a weapon dies regardless.”

Stalker looked a tiny bit disappointed, but he nodded in understanding.

“Let’s finish this,” Dancer said in a resolute voice.

The two female Shaman separated from them to tend to their tasks, leaving Kyven and Stalker to hurry up to what were now the front lines, which was groups of Arcans trying to dig defending humans out of houses and businesses in the center of town. There was sporadic musket fire into and out of the houses further up the street, and a small fire was burning in a wagon parked in an inn’s stable yard. Kyven and Stalker called in a group of sergeants and corporals, and they knelt in a semicircle in front of the two Shaman. “We’re ending this,” Kyven said. “Set fire to any house holding defending humans, kill anyone who comes out *except for* children that aren’t carrying weapons. Those you drive south and east. Just let them go, they’re no threat to us and we have more important things to worry about,” he told them.

“Black, Treeskipper, Panva, bring your squads up to me and we’ll handle burning the buildings,” Stalker ordered. “Goldeyes, Bull, Fisher, Malsanna, Yip, form a perimeter, contain anyone that might get past the front line squads. Everyone else, you move your squads into the area and support us while we set the fires. Everyone understand?”

They all nodded as Kyven caused a map of the town center to appear on the ground between them, oriented towards the Arcan leaders of the army. “Here we are, and this is the area we have to contain. Perimeter squads, spread your Arcans out along these three streets, and cover these side streets and alleys here, here, here, and here,” he told them, pointing. “That should give you full containment. Support squads, move your Arcans into these intersections here, here, here, here, and here. Hold those five intersections, and you control the entire center of town. Snapdragon, I want you to take three climbing Arcans up onto the rooftops with some of the small casks of oil and get to town hall, then set fire to it,” he told a long,

tall, lanky female cat Arcan, only a little shorter than Fastpaw. “On your way back, set fire to every building you move across.”

“Easily done, Shaman,” the cat Arcan nodded.

“I want all the other climbing Arcans up on the rooftops with enough shot to hold them over for a while. Concentrate them at the five intersections we need to hold, at least four Arcans per position. They’ll be covering everyone else on the ground.”

“I’ll get them where they need to be, Shaman,” Fisher, another cat Arcan, replied.

“Any questions?” Kyven asked. When the assembled non-coms said nothing, Kyven stood. “Alright, get the Arcans in position. We start our push into the town center in ten minutes,” he told them.

Kyven didn’t observe, he participated in the last phase of the assault on Orlann. He moved with Stalker and the other Arcans into the center of town, the Arcans armed with firetubes and oil, and they moved with cautious speed into the heart of the city. The Arcans behind them set fire to every building on both sides of the street as they advanced up to an abandoned barricade, six dead Flaurens splayed out behind it, then Kyven and Stalker used spirit sight to locate every window-lurking sniper with a line of fire on the intersection. Stalker used Kyven’s rifle as Kyven used the shadows, again using the tendrils of shadow and a central mass into which he blended to become invisible, like some giant spider with no joints in its legs that could move quickly and easily over the rooftops. Kyven found using the shadows like that to be much less taxing than using magic, but it still required effort, particularly since he was creating very large controlled shadows that were solid enough to bear his weight. But it wasn’t as taxing as it used to be, his practicing with solid shadows had made them easier to form, which let him create ones big enough to carry him. From his vantage point, Kyven used his pistols to take out any shooters at the windows while Arcans below fanned out with firetubes and started setting fire to every building they could reach, breaking out windows and sending the cones of

fire into the dry interiors of the buildings everywhere they could, and setting fire to the relatively dry wood under the eaves of the red-tiled roofs where they could not. The Arcans moved quickly through the center of town, Kyven and Stalker covering the firetube-bearing Arcans, and once they moved down the last street, they withdrew back to the barricades at the key intersections for cover and simply waited.

It didn't take long. Screams and shouts were the first indicator, and only a short while later, the humans started fleeing the burning buildings, some of them jumping out of second story windows because fires on the lower floor were probably blocking the doors. The Arcans at the intersections did as they were told, firing on any adult human that they could get in their sights. The people were trapped in the streets between intersections held by the enemy, causing many of them to try to go between the closely-spaced houses, but that only brought them out onto streets that were also held by Arcan soldiers. The humans got more and more desperate as the fires spread and intensified, and while they rushed about searching for a safe avenue of escape, Kyven moved from house to house, freeing the Arcans that they left behind and whose collars prevented them from leaving. Kyven moved with swiftness, since many were trapped in houses that were burning, swooping in, draining the collar, then picking up the Arcan and swooping right back out. He put them on the ground and told them to run for the nearest intersection, where Arcans would get them safely out of the city. Kyven worked with quick yet methodical determination as the Arcans continued to winnow the human townsfolk, more and more bodies laying the streets, illuminated by burning houses and shops.

It only took about another two hours. The entire center of town was a conflagration as the Arcans pulled back, for there were no more humans to shoot or Arcans to save. With the destruction of the center of town, it completely destroyed all human resistance, leaving only stragglers and those still hiding in cellars or attics that the Arcans had not bothered to flush out and kill, for they were no threat. The vast majority of the townsfolk and the entire army garrison and militia formed to reinforce them had been

wiped out, to the last man, and the only survivors were a handful of women, old men, and children that were deemed no threat and passed over, or managed to hide cleverly enough to be missed by the Arcans that sacked their homes or shops.

Of the ten thousand or so Flaurens that lived in Orlann and the five hundred soldiers that were left, barely two hundred managed to escape Orlann alive.

Kyven stood at the edge of town and watched as his Arcans streamed out of town carrying weapons, food, supplies, and leading newly freed Arcans to the north, where the rest of the host was waiting for them. Sirra and Dauro sat to each side of him, Vasha pawed at the ground with her hoof directly behind him, and Stalker and Dancer stood with him, watching as Clover carried an Arcan child out of the edge of town, leading nearly a dozen others. Of them, only Clover had suffered any real injury, the bullet burn on her cheek, though Vasha had some scratches on her forelegs that Kyven would have to treat when they had time. Despite being such a big target, Vasha had come out of the battle relatively unscathed, and that was thanks to the iron plates the Arcans hung off her shoulders and chest. Without those, she'd have been shot three or four times...though as big and powerful as she was, he doubted any of them would have been fatal on its own. Vasha was so big, a musket ball wouldn't be able to penetrate deeply enough to do any severe damage unless she was right on top of the shooter or the shooter got lucky and hit her in a vital spot, like the eye or throat. And if the shooter didn't kill her, he'd just make her *very* angry. "This is the last of our freed brothers and sisters, Kyven," she reported. "And the last of our brave fighters are evacuating Orlann as we speak. They're setting enough fires that will burn the entire city to the ground by tonight."

Kyven glanced to the east, where the false dawn was starting to lighten the horizon, then nodded to her. "That's it, then, friends. Orlann has fallen," he declared.

"Next is Tallasar," Stalker growled, making a fist so tightly that his knuckles cracked.

Kyven nodded. “And once Tallasar falls, the rest of Flaur will fold like fresh laundry,” he added. “Let’s get everyone to our camp and take stock of our own people. We lost more Arcans than I expected,” he said with a dark frown.

“They died bravely and well, brother. For an Arcan, there is no better way to go,” Dancer reminded him.

“I don’t have to like it,” he said as he turned around. “But for what it’s worth, they’ve passed the test. They took Orlann in a single night. By the time we get to Tallasar, they’ll be ready for a *real* battle. Believe me, friends, taking Tallasar will be the hardest thing we do in this campaign,” he told them as they started walking towards the distant treeline, Kyven picking up a toddler bear Arcan and cradling her as she smiled up at him. “They know we’re coming, and they have time to bring in every weapon they can get their hands on to oppose us. They’ll have *far* more than just five outdated smoothbore cannons in Tallasar,” he warned.

“That cuts both ways, brother. Once we break the Flaurens at Tallasar, they’ll have no men or equipment to protect the rest of Flaur,” Stalker said.

Kyven nodded. “So this will be all or nothing for both sides. We either take Tallasar or we all die. For them, they either hold Tallasar or they watch Flaur burn. And you can imagine what kind of battle that’s going to be.” “Neither side retreats,” Clover said darkly.

“Exactly,” Kyven nodded. “They have nowhere else to go, we have no choice but to raze the city to the ground and wipe out the army, else they’ll come back to bite us in the ass later down the road, either us or Danna and our Arcan brothers and sisters to the north. If we don’t kill them here in Flaur, if we just pass them by, that army might be laying siege to Haven next year,” he said grimly.

“I’m confident we can take them, brother,” Stalker declared.

Kyven looked at the tall, menacing Wolf Arcan and nodded, his expression sober, almost grim. “I am too. I’m just worried about how much

it's going to cost us to do it. And believe me, brother, we will *pay* for that victory. My main hope is that it's a price that we can afford."

The small group of Shaman, Arcans, and monsters reached the treeline and vanished into the murky gloom created by the tall pines, leaving behind a burning city inhabited only by the dead.